University of Alberta

Mapping Gender Politics in African Drama: Three Plays of Tess Onwueme

by

Oliver K. Kamau ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled, **Mapping Gender Politics in African Drama: Three Plays of Tess Onwueme** submitted by Oliver Kibe Kamau in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an examination of Tess Onwueme's plays namely; *The Broken Calabash*, *The Reign of Wazobia*, and *Tell it to Women*. Based on the premise that female playwrights are hardly recognized, it shows how Onwueme merits a central position in African literary world. Using Western and African feminist theories, each play is analyzed in terms of its representation of the female characters.

As one of the few critical examinations employing feminist theories in African drama, it discusses all the three plays as distinctly feminist works. In its contribution to the gender politics in emerging capitalist societies in Africa, the thesis looks at the determination African women are portraying in order to counter their oppressors.

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INTRODUCTION

A: Purpose of the Study

A critical look at modern African literature shows a disparity between the representation of African male and female writers. Even though African female writers have been writing for a long time, there is little evidence of their creative works in male-dominated African literary journals, critical studies, or anthologies.[1] This imbalance has led to the false notion that modern African Literature is the preserve of established world-famous male writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, J. P. Clark, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, to name a few. The absence of African female writers from the literary world can be partially explained by exclusionist male practices in modern African Literature, which privilege works by men. The use of 'Eurocentric' criteria, or adoption of Western-centred models in the criticism of African drama, has also contributed to their absence. Consequently, African women have ended up being doubly erased from the scholarly and literary world.

As a Western-educated African male studying in a Western university, my task is to find out whether contemporary African female writers are articulating a definite discourse by raising, confronting, and interrogating the material and historical conditions responsible for women's oppression in Africa. Since it is impossible to examine all the 'neglected' African female playwrights, the intention of this thesis is to introduce one outstanding African female playwright, Tess Onwueme, who has yet to receive the recognition she deserves. My choice of Onwueme has been influenced both by her productivity and her ethnicity.

Besides Zulu Sofola, a fellow Nigerian playwright who has written more than thirty plays, Onwueme can be identified as the most prolific Nigerian female playwright to date. Born in Nigeria in 1955, Onwueme has written more than twenty plays, and has won numerous coveted awards. Such awards include The Association of Nigerian Authors Award (ANA), which she has won twice, once in 1985, with *The Desert Encroaches*, and again in 1995, with *Tell it to Women* (1992). Other awards include the 1988 Distinguished Authors Award, the 1989/90 Martin Luther King/Caesar Chavez Distinguished Writers Award, the 1993 Nigerian Eagles Award, and the 1995 University of Wisconsin System Award for excellent contribution by women of color to the university system.

As an Ibo, one of the most populous ethnic communities in Nigeria, Onwueme belongs to a community that has produced the most prolific writers in Nigeria, such as Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa, Elechi Amadi and Kofi Osofisan, yet barely anything is known about her. Coming from an Ibo, male-dominated literary world, it is important to analyze her specific viewpoints when dealing with the pressing realities faced by African women. This is because male writers, especially from her country and ethnic community, have not written a lot about women, and even where they have, it has been through stereotypes.

In her plays such as *The Broken Calabash, Riots in Heavens, The Missing Face, Tell it to Women* and *The Reign of Wazobia,* Onwueme examines the impact of socio-political and economic changes and the effect they have on female characters. In these plays, her protagonists are females who revolt against both male-centred ideologies

and oppressive social institutions. To understand how she represents these female characters within an African socio-economic context, I have analyzed her dramatic works using a materialist feminist framework. In particular, I look at how she addresses and interprets gender issues through the experiences, struggles, and ambitions of her female characters. However, I am aware of the current suspicion that the term 'feminism' provokes in African literary scholarship. Many African gender scholars view feminism as a problematic discourse and identify it as a colonizing and totalizing strategy from Western academic institutions (Nfah-Abbenyi, 9-10). My intention in this study is neither to bifurcate nor demonize one discourse over the other, but to walk a contentious road using both Western and African understandings of feminist theories in reading Onwueme's drama. The term 'African', though problematic, is used here to refer to anyone whose roots are in geopolitical Africa, and whose ideas are presented from a perspective of African sensibility and experience. 'Modern African Literature' on the other hand, will collectively refer to literary and dramatic works written from the 1960s to the present.

By employing both Western and African understandings of feminism, I intend to blur the binary opposition that occurs when one discourse is privileged over the other. A number of current non-African critics of modern African Literature have practiced this 'oppositionality' or 'epistemic violence' as Spivak calls it (Spivak, 43), and, logically, have found African literature lacking or inferior to that of Euro-Americans. Consequently, most modern African scholars treat with skepticism any non-African paradigm that ignores African historical, social, cultural, and political experiences.

Unfortunately, oppositional paradigms continue to appear in both the analysis and criticism of Modern African Literature. Chinua Achebe, for instance, in an article entitled "Colonialist Criticism", condemns the external practice of using Eurocentric theories and standards as the only legitimate strategies for reading and understanding African literary creativity (Achebe, 57-61). Ngugi wa Thiong'o, another African writer, questions the centering and legitimization of English as the language of Modern African Literature by his fellow African writers and scholars in the academy: "How did we arrive at this acceptance of 'the fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature', in our culture and in our politics? How did we, as African writers, come to be so feeble towards the claims of our languages on us and so aggressive in our claims on other languages, particularly the languages of colonization?"(Ngugi,9).

It is within such an African context, therefore, that I introduce feminist theory into the analysis of Onwueme's drama. Specifically, I apply a materialist feminist analysis for two reasons. First, unlike cultural or liberal feminism, materialist feminism grounds the gender debate in more gender-neutral terms by viewing women as historical subjects whose relation to prevailing social structures is also influenced by such things as race, class, and sex/gender systems. Such a position negates gender polarization as the only cause of the victimization of women and invites us to see gender as a social construct that is oppressive to both men and women. Second, within a representational context such as that offered by drama, materialist feminist theory helps to critique representational apparatuses that create mythologized subject positions. Its insistence on destabilizing the authority of a singular narrative point of view through dramatic

representation helps to underscore Onwueme's non-traditional representational style. As Jill Dolan argues, "Estranging the spectator from the conditions of life outlined by the representation denaturalizes the dominant ideology that benefits from such 'natural' social relations" (107). In looking at the category "woman" as a class oppressed by material conditions and social relations, this theory is useful in contextualizing Onwueme's female characters.

B. Significance of the Study

This study is full of potential contradictions and inconsistencies, for, as a black and a Western educated male, I have to constantly resist appropriating feminist theory indiscriminately from the West. I am also aware that much of my theorizing might appear as yet another attempt by a male to consolidate his power and control by speaking "for," "in place of," or "in the name of" African women. My analysis of Onwueme's dramatic works should not be interpreted from this perspective. Instead, it should be considered as a conscious step by a "privileged" black male, who in the past has uncritically ignored the place of African women in the canon, who in the present is grappling with the numerous discourses on gender politics, and who would like to make revisionist contributions to these discourses.

My interest in this study has been precipitated by the exclusion of African female writers by dominant patriarchal attitudes and customs. This unfortunate practice has been reified in and by the institutions of literary and dramatic criticisms. My choice of Onwueme's works developed out of a happenstance. While browsing through the library section on African literature, I came across three African plays by a then -unfamiliar Tess

Onwueme; namely, *The Desert Encroaches (1984), Three Plays: The Broken Calabash, Parables for a Season, The Reign of Wazobia (1993),* and *Tell it to Women* (1997). Further research revealed that Onwueme was the second-most prolific writer in Nigeria after Zulu Sofola. Why had I not heard of such a famous African writer? The only obvious reason why Onwueme has been in the 'blind spot' of African literature is the exclusionary male practice of publishing, teaching, and privileging of works by males.

C: Theorizing African Feminism

In re-reading African women's dramatic writing within a materialist feminist framework, I anticipate moving beyond a revisionist interpretation towards a serious examination of social, cultural, economic and political factors affecting literary and dramatic productivity of African writers. Since the genuine concerns of African women have remained hidden under ethnological theories, facile generalizations, and stereotypical representations, a study of what African female writers have to say for and about themselves offers interesting findings. Recent critical attention that is being accorded to the development of feminist aesthetics and Black/African aesthetics in many articles and full-length studies offers an excellent opportunity for the examination of dramatic writings by African women. The integration of these two aesthetics will help to give a better understanding how African female writers have conceived the debate surrounding gender politics. If in the process a redefinition of African feminist aesthetics and feminist criticism is achieved, I will take pride in my contribution to a feminist interpretation of African drama.

One unfortunate trend within modern African literary world has been the emphasis given to the genre of the novel at the expense of the play. Most current theorizing and criticism start with the novel before they trickle over to the play. Within African literary criticism, much has been written about what constitutes a feminist novel, but there is barely anything that shows how feminist theory can be applied to African drama. Consequently, coming up with an accurate and publishable definition of what constitutes African feminist drama demands paying considerable attention to these dramatic works which have been formerly excluded. Similarly, a search for the parameters similar to those that African literary critics have used to label African feminist novels is required. However, the fact that the novel and play use different forms to present their worlds does not mean that no consensus can be reached as to what constitutes African feminist drama.

Though there are varieties of definitions of what constitutes feminist theatre/drama, I want to lean on a few definitions by both White Western and African American feminists in an attempt to develop a comprehensive working definition. No African definition of feminist drama will be given for the simple reason that barely anything has been articulated in published form. Thus, my discussion of different definitions will be restricted to ones I have found helpful for the analysis of African feminist drama.

Anselma Dell'Olio, an African-American feminist, defines feminist drama by its inherent content. For her, feminist drama revolves around women characters, and is therefore the "study of woman and her sub-human position" (33). Onwueme's *The*

Broken Calabash, *The Reign of Wazobia*, and *Tell it to Women* fit within such a definition. In these three plays, female characters dominate in numbers and importance as the main protagonists. In *The Broken Calabash*, male characters are very few, and represent only a forty-two per cent of the total cast. As the central character, Ona, is an indomitable female who confronts and overturns the retrogressive patriarchal practices displayed by her father. In *The Reign of Wazobia*, the female King is able to frustrate efforts by male chiefs to unseat her after her short interim reign. As in *The Broken Calabash*, male characters are in a minority. In *Tell it to Women*, ordinary rural female characters are portrayed as the protagonists who succeed in stopping the efforts of their modern educated counterparts from misusing them in their pursuit of economic gains and power.

For Jill Dolan, feminist drama develops a subversive, anti-representational, anti-Aristotelian mimetic model that interrogates dominant institutional apparatuses that leave the women unarticulated within its discourse: "Since it [mimetic drama] directs its address to a gender-specific spectator, most performance employs culturally determined codes that reinforce cultural conditioning. Performance usually addresses the male as an active subject, and encourages him to identify with the male hero in the narrative"(2). Dolan's position against the nature of mainstream representation underscores two prominent objectives of feminist drama. First, it reinforces the interrogation of those representations that objectify female performers and female spectators as passive and powerless. Second, feminist drama revolves around "resistant reading". Through this framework, the spectators are invited to analyze the text's meanings by "reading" against

the grain and resisting the manipulation of both the performance and the cultural texts. Onwueme's plays interrogate the objectification of female performers by inviting the readers to move beyond the conservative and singular sense of order normally naturalized by realistic drama. In *The Broken Calabash*, for example, Ona refuses to function as a sexual site for her father's clan, and ends up disrupting the Idu's sense of order. *The Reign of Wazobia*, too, brings the male chiefs out of their stupor when they find themselves challenged by a female king. By employing multiple voices of narration, the dramatic texts are able to free the spectators from the seduction of an illusionist realistic text, an accomplishment that, according to Dolan, is a major requirement of a feminist dramatic text.

Like Dolan, Sue Ellen Case distances feminist drama from the Aristotelian mimetic model. For her, such an illusionist theatre abets the erasure of females from full participation in the theatrical spectacle and the stage. Her assertion, therefore, is to subvert such a model in order to "rewrite" female bodies back into representation (4). Understood from this perspective, Onwueme's works portray a unique style of 'undoing' the hegemony of the Aristotelian model. She evolves a dramatic style richly invested in the African tradition of storytelling, music, dance, mime, ritual, and proverbs. All these stylistic modes are conspicuously present in all three plays, though most evident in *Tell it to Women*. In a recent telephone interview, Onwueme identified the three sources that have influenced her unique dramatic style: African folkloric traditions; Kenyan writer and playwright Ngugi wa Thiong'o; and German playwright Bertolt Brecht. [2]

Despite Case's strong position against realistic drama, not many African female playwrights in theatre would endorse her argument fully. Many would argue that within the African context, realistic drama has a role to social role to play but this has to be done responsibly. In rejecting the linear narrative as a universally male mode of representation, Case runs the risk of oversimplifying the nature of mainstream theatre as a seamless narrative. It would be inaccurate to assert that realistic drama in Africa is incapable of expressing feminist politics. Successful modern dramatic works by the few contemporary African women such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Penina Mhando, Efua Sutherland, and Zulu Sofola modify realism with what Ngugi calls the "language of African theatre" (34-62). Such a "language" not only involves the use of songs, storytelling, rituals, dances, or mimes, but also incorporates the community's active participation during the performance. On the positive side, Case's point needs to be examined carefully since her attack on unmediated mimesis arises from her commitment to creating theatre that revolts from oppressive traditional forms. Such a position is one way of trying to define a feminist performance. Only those techniques that are disruptive, subversive or ambiguous are likely to foster the creation of female consciousness, where the female herself becomes an empowered spectator, to use Dolan's term.

It is Janet Brown's (1979) definition of feminist drama that I find most applicable in analyzing *The Broken Calabash, The Reign of Wazobia,* and *Tell it to Women.* Brown submits that "a feminist drama is one in which the agent is woman, her purpose autonomy, and her scene a society in which women are powerless" (15). Within this

definition, it is possible to situate the world, the purpose, and the politics contained in the three plays already mentioned. By applying Brown's definition, Onwueme's female protagonists such as Ona, Wazobia, Yemoja, and Adaku become symbolic representations of women who proclaim their agency in a bid to contain, disrupt, challenge, and revolt against the oppressive material world dominated by men.

All these definitions of feminist drama are not comprehensive, but they possess a common denominator. They try to highlight the importance of empowering the female protagonists by freeing them from oppressive structures. My approach towards Onwueme's three plays, therefore, focuses on the central positions of the female characters; the various feminist theatrical strategies used in each play; and, most important, the dramatic exposure of social-economic contexts that are represented through the struggles the characters wage in their bid to claim agency.

D: Feminist Theory and Modern African Literature

When the term "African" is juxtaposed with "feminism", interpretive problems arise. As spectators, we are bound to ask, what makes the African dramatic or fictional genres "African" and "feminist" at the same time? In attempting to answer this question, I hope to reconcile these two concepts. Most important, I want to underscore my preference for "materialist feminism" in the process of this reconciliation. Materialist feminism transcends a singular way of viewing women's oppression by demanding that economic as well as other oppressive social political structures be put into consideration when analyzing oppression of women. It is in this context that the terms "feminism",

"feminist" and "feminist theory" are situated when interfaced with modern African drama.

The concept "feminism" has received a lot of mixed reaction, mostly from non-white women who feel excluded by the whiteness of feminist theory. For example, bell hooks argues that "many women are reluctant to advocate the term because they are uncertain about the meaning" (23). Stopping short of attributing "whiteness" to this reluctance, she gives the example of a San Francisco columnist who found out that many black women "who obviously believe in everything that proud feminists believe in, dismiss the term 'feminist' as something unpleasant, something with which they do not want to be associated"(22). On the other hand, Alice Walker reads militant connotations associated with feminism in America and comes up with her own term, "womanist" (ix). Walker is not the only woman who has avoided the contentious feminist label. There are numerous African writers who have expressed dislike at being described as feminists, despite working in pursuit of objectives with feminist leanings. Examples of such writers include Nigeria's Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa and Senegal's Mariama Bâ and Liking Werewere.

Despite the denials by these female writers that they are not "feminists", most of their works are self-conscious enough to support an African feminist discourse. Indeed, an increasing number of African women scholars believe that in the works of the African female writers, enough gender politics exists to support an African feminist discourse. In *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, Carole Boyce Davis attempts to constitute an African feminist discourse that involves taking that which is of value from

mainstream feminist criticism and African literary criticism (12). Although she does not delineate a specific definition of African feminism, the issues she highlights depict the burdens of African women as they struggle within material and historical conditions.

Philomena Steady, an African critic, asserts that there exists a discourse in African Literature which could be called African feminism, and foregrounds the discourses of feminism and, feminist theory as they intersect with Modern African Literature. According to her, the main goals of African feminism revolve around the search for female autonomy, and a determination to be resourceful and self-reliant (35). Like Brown's definition of feminist drama, Steady's definition of African feminism shares strikingly similar principles: "True feminism is an abnegation of patronizing male protection, a determination to be resourceful and self-reliant. The majority of black women in Africa and the Diaspora have developed these characteristics, though not always by choice"(35).

Rather than view African feminism as a weapon to be aimed at men, which would be the case if she was a separatist feminist, Steady insists that there exists an immediate struggleon the African continent which cannot be won when the two genders are involved in divisive ideologies. Both men and women need to wage a common struggle against the yokes of traditional, colonial, neo-colonial, and imperial institutions that have led to a social hierarchy that privileges men. However, this does not mean that African feminist politics should be relegated to the background in the struggle against neo-colonialism and imperialism. Instead, men are challenged to recognize and take

collective action against the subjugation of African women, not only by sympathizing with the women's conditions, but by giving up male power of privilege.

In concluding this examination of the value of 'African feminist' discourse within African literature, I want to stress my reluctance to view gender politics from a singular perspective of binary opposites. Instead, I employ both Western and African understanding of feminist theory to arrive at a comprehensive analysis of Onwueme's works. Chapter One, which deals with *The Broken Calabash*, moves beyond a rigid interpretation of the "cultural clash" motif in the play. I theorize that the encounter between modern and traditional forces can function as a liberating location for marginalized women within the society. In this play, I examine how Ona, as the protagonist, is able to frustrate patriarchal practices such as forced marriages. In the process, I argue that as a female character she is able to use her educational foundation to stand against most of the oppressive social structures in her path. Using materialist feminist theories of dramatic representation, I demonstrate that Ona frustrates the inscription of female bodies as sexual sites by implicating her father in her pregnancy.

In Chapter Two, entitled *The Reign of Wazobia*, I move from the domestic and private space to the public and political. I question the re-presentation of women as second-class citizens in a society where power and its control is the preserve of men. Through Wazobia, the central female character, I refute common perceptions by Western radical feminists that African women are powerless, voiceless, and passive. Simultaneously, I argue that Wazobia's refusal to surrender her throne to the male chiefs is a refusal to endorse women's exclusion from political power in the future. In this

respect, her insistence on retaining the political seat bestowed on her by the men is similar to Ona's insistence on her freedom in *The Broken Calabash*. Wazobia's representation, I contend, is another negation of radical feminists' construction of passive African women.

Finally, in Chapter Three, I move from the private space of *The Broken Calabash* and the political space in *The Reign of Wazobia* to the still larger socio-economic space represented in *Tell it to Women*. In the latter play, I posit the dangers inherent in introducing an external paradigm without considering its viability within the local context. Such a practice, I argue, is colonizing and totalizing and only serves to legitimize the external models as the only ones capable of transforming the local experiences. Through the two middle-class female characters, Ruth and Daisy, presented as the antagonists, and the rural women presented as the protagonists, I argue that any efforts to redress women's marginalization without an interrogation of the social and economic forces that shape the society is bound to fail. In a social hierarchy where power and resources are in the hands of a selected few, competition, greed, and self-interest are bound to arise, as Ruth and Daisy reveal by their actions. However, I demonstrate the resilient spirit shown by the rural women in their showdown with the middle class, and link it back to Ona's desire for self-agency and King Wazobia's commitment to political empowerment.

END NOTES

[1] Eustace Palmer's, *An Introduction to the African Novel* refers only once to a woman writer (Flora Nwapa) and then goes ahead to label her "an inferior novelist" (61). Women authors disappear in Palmer's *The Growth of the African Novel* just as they do in David Cook's *African Literature: A Critical View* or Gerald Moore's, *Twelve African Writers.* In Lee Nichols' *Conversation with African Writers: Interviews with Twenty - Six African Authors* only five of them are women. In critical journals for example, *African Literature Today* did not publish a full length article on a woman writer until its seventh volume (1975), another article appeared in the eight volume (1976) and did not include another until its twelfth volume in (1982) .

[2] In an interview that I had with Onwueme on 20th June 1999, Onwueme pointed out three major influences in her works; namely Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Bertolt Brecht and African folklore. According to her, Ngugi was a major influence given his fondness for using African songs, rituals, mimes, dances, and oral narratives. Now exiled, and teaching in the USA, Ngugi acknowledges that Brecht had an influence in his writing. Having written her Master's thesis on Ngugi, as Onwueme told me herself, it is easier to understand why Brecht and African folklore would have such a powerful impact on her.

CHAPTER ONE

The Broken Calabash

In African feminist scholarship, there is growing acknowledgment that certain male hegemonic excesses in pre-colonial African societies helped to oppress and perpetuate the exploitation of women (Nfa-Abbenyi, 22-34). Examples of such male hegemonic practices that are being interrogated by gender scholars in African drama include: female genital mutilation, forced marriages, wife beating, widow inheritance, and denial of the right to inherit property. It is within this context that Onwueme's *The Broken Calabash* is analyzed. I look at the effects of the encounter between modern and traditional forces that has elsewhere been described as a "cultural clash" (Dunton, 96-97) and how they are implicated in the oppression of women. However, I reiterate the fact that Onwueme is not protesting against all traditional African practices in *The Broken Calabash,* but is opposed to pre-colonial and post-colonial cultural practices that have undermined the dignity of African women. In this respect, the modern-traditional polemic becomes a significant trope in examining the liminality of women. My argument in *The Broken Calabash* is that apart from polarizing those who embrace either realm, the "cultural -clash" encounter becomes a site where women to refuse to be objectified any more or else run the risk of being marginalized even further.

By focusing on Ona, the play's protagonist, I demonstrate how Onwueme constructs female identity as a refusal to abide by the controlling parameters set down by the patriarchal society. Ona's role is used to disrupt and subvert the social hierarchy that allows men to determine the social role of women. This claim is enforced by the use of

three major theories of representation and subject formation. The first theory, materialist feminism, is useful in showing gender as a social construct that fashions females as gendered products that are exchangeable in a male-dominated political economy. The second theory, an anthropological one as developed by Gayle Rubin, revolves around primitive reciprocity and the exchange of women and is used to reinforce the position of women as objects within the marriage context. Finally, Jacques Lacan's theory of the Symbolic Order is applied in order to portray how its inscriptions in minds of the individuals can lead to internalizations of gender and sexual roles.

A critical reading of *The Broken Calabash* portrays it as a dramatic re-assessment of specific and questionable cultural practices in post-colonial Nigeria. Written in 1984, the play was originally produced by Oweri Theatre Troupe at the National Theatre Lagos, Nigeria. Ona a young, university undergraduate is an *Idegbe* (the only female offspring in the family), and cannot marry outside her family, according to Ibo's endogamous marriage tradition. In order to maintain her family's patrilineage, she is expected to "practice the law" by marrying within her immediate family. However, her love, is invested in the youthful Diaku, who happens to be an *Osu*. *Osus* are cult-slaves who function as "special priests", although they do not enjoy the higher status normally enjoyed by other priests. Like the *Idegbes*, they can only marry within their own social group. Consequently, they are a people with a status dilemma: a people hated and despised, yet indispensable in their ritual roles (Leith-Ross, 206).

In this regard, Ona's father, Courtuma cannot imagine his daughter choosing an *Osu* as his son-in-law. He therefore remains firmly opposed to any relationship between

Diaku and his daughter. In order to derail Ona's intentions, he overwhelms her with suggestive comments whose ambiguity is marked by her failure to distinguish them as signs of filial love, or expressions of sexual desire. Caught in this dilemma but determined to marry Diaku, Ona comes up with a plot designed to eliminate the patriarchal barriers symbolized by her father. She decides to become pregnant, and upon being questioned about the man responsible it, points an accusatory finger at her father. Scandalized, Courtuma is unable to withstand the shame triggered by violating the alleged taboo of incest. Aware that he cannot absolve himself from the allegation, he resorts to suicide, another taboo in the Ibo culture. Nobody in the community can commit incest, let alone suicide, and expect to be given a decent burial. Consequently, Courtuma's body is thrown into the bush where the evil spirits are believed to stay. This, in a nutshell, is the plot of *The Broken Calabash*.

If *The Broken Calabash* is to be read as a feminist drama, contextualization of feminist theory and its analysis of gender/sex hierarchies become imperative. In this regard, various definitions of gender and sex are outlined in order to examine the links between sexuality and power in a system of interlocking gender, sex and class oppression like the one presented in the play. Generally, the definition of "sex" by a number of feminist scholars has been within biological terms. Cameroonian Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi identifies sex as "a person's biological maleness and femaleness" (16), while Patricia Collins, an African-American, sees it as a "biological category attached to the body", where human beings are born either males or females (164). Arguing that sex is empirical, Dolan's definition is not significantly different from Nfah-Abbenyi's or

Collins'; for her "sex is biological, based in genital differences between males and females" (6).

Gender, on the other hand, has been distinguished from sex as culturally rather than biologically determined. An increasing number of feminists argue that men and patriarchal ideologies control women's reproductive and sexual capacities. Consequently, they view gender as a system of meaning within cultures that is used to categorize male and female sexuality in hierarchical terms. As a result, women become victims of their reproductive anatomy and the dogma of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Ortner and Whitehead: 1984, Rubin, 157-210; Rich: 139-167, Abel and Abel: 139-167 and many others). According to Dolan, gender refers to the "fashioning of maleness and femaleness" into cultural categories of masculinity and femininity " (6), as well as "a socially-imposed division of the sexes, an arrangement of relationships that also prescribes sexuality" (10-11). For Diamond, gender refers to words, gestures, appearances, ideas and behavior that the dominant culture understands as indices of feminine or masculine identity (123). All these definitions underscore the construction of gender as a cultural concept, and are therefore useful in the political undertaking of fragmenting gender definitions as they unfold in *The Broken Calabash.*

Ona's laments to her friend Ugo about the excessive controls that her father has placed on her life portray her as a victim of male domination. As the only daughter, and child in the family, she becomes an object that must be carefully guarded by her father. As a result, he disapproves of any action that might lead to her gaining freedom to do what she wants with her life as a woman. If Courtuma is performing his parental duties,

why does he prevent his twenty four-year-old daughter from demonstrating how responsible she can be? In any case, Ona spends most of her time at the university, away from the "controlling gaze" of her father. By restricting her movements to the Sunday service only, the only place that her father permits her to go without his surveillance, this patriarchal figure shows his unwillingness to let her pursue her goals. We may see fear in Courtuma's reluctance, for it is a common principle that when the underdog shows the capacity to flex his/her muscles, the wielders of power become wary of the threat to the normative hierarchy of social relations.

If Ona had been the only boy in the family, it would be highly unlikely that Courtuma would exercise the sort of controlling gaze he has on her. Within such an entrenched tradition of an all-powerful masculine figure, Courtuma perceives that he is the only person capable of safeguarding the security and sexual purity of his daughter. Such a mentality, enforced by cultural signification of the female as an object to be desired and controlled, underscores the reproduction of sexual arrangements whose intentions are to reify gender conditioning and enforce sexual convention (Rubin, 183). Despite her status as a university student, which would give her opportunities to define and determine her life, Ona still finds herself controlled by the ubiquitous presence of her father. She is uncertain if she will ever leave her home for marriage elsewhere (28) and cannot even express herself in front of Diaku, her boyfriend, because the father "...always hangs around whenever Diaku comes" (29). Courtuma's denial of Ona's subjectivity and treatment of her as an object to be owned and controlled best illustrates Gayle Rubin's re-reading of Claude Levi-Strauss's anthropological theories.

While building on Claude Levi-Strauss's theories of reciprocity and exchange of women, Gayle Rubin traces the causes of women's oppression through anthropological and psychological discourses (157-201). In his study on kinship patterns in Africa, Levi-Strauss contended that numerous "primitive" societies related to each other by giving, receiving, and reciprocating gifts. He noted that social exchange or transaction took the physical form of food, spells, rituals, words, names, ornaments, and tools. The gifts were the fabric by which the societies were held together in the absence of specialized governmental institutions: "The gift is the primitive way of achieving the peace that in civil society is secured by the state" (Sahlins, 169, 175). To this theory of gift exchange, Levi-Strauss added another- the exchange of women. For him, marriages were the most basic form for exchanging women who were valued as the most precious form of gift. Unlike the relationship of reciprocity that followed gift exchange, the exchange of women resulted in a permanent kinship relationship between the parties involved. Thus, warring societies could offer women in order to secure a lasting truce. Similarly, in a marriage transaction, both families of the partners involved entered into a binding and honored relationship with each other. In this gift exchange paradigm, there lies a clear distinction between the "gift "and "giver." While the women were the gifts that were exchanged, men became the exchange partners, and women suffered as a result of their circulation between men.

Rubin's reconstitution of Levi-Strauss paradigm of exchange of women is important in understanding the social relationships portrayed in *The Broken Calabash*. For her, the paradigm locates the oppression of women within social systems rather than

in biology. In the system of exchange, women are in no position to realize the benefits of their circulation, because the transaction happens between two sets of male families. In any case, to enter into the transaction as partners, one must have something to give, and in a patriarchal culture where women are given away, it is impossible to give oneself away. The erasure of women within such kinship social relations leads Rubin to view the subordination of women as a product of the relationships by which sex and gender are organized and then produced.

> "Exchange of women" is a shorthand for expressing that the social relations of a kinship system specify that men have certain rights in their female kin. In this sense, the exchange of women is a profound perception of a system in which women do not have full rights to themselves. (177)

Rubin's paradigm of the gift/women exchange can be adapted in order to examine Ona's plight. As a daughter, Ona's fate is to be disposed of to another male. Though her father fondly calls her "Jewel" (32, 33, 46, 49), it is difficult to dissociate the term from its commercial overtones, suggesting the material importance of the exchangeable woman.

To prepare Ona for her future life, Courtuma prods his wife Oliaku to open the topic of marriage with their daughter. "You must from now on try to impress it upon Ona that she must begin to have in mind the kind of wife we must marry for her" (34). As an *Idegbe*, Ona has few options. Foremost is the expectation that she should propagate the family's lineage by bearing children for her father by marrying another

wife. Within Ibo culture, "woman marriage" is a recognized institution by which women can validate their status in the society. Uchendu explains that there are Ibo women who pay their own "bridewealth" in order to acquire a "wife" and the rights associated in having a wife. "If such female husbands have no children, they let their brides choose (*Iko)* lovers who are acceptable to them to beget children by their "wives"(50). The female husband adopts children born out of such relationship. Similarly, an *Idebge's* marriage to a woman follows the same pattern, the only difference being that, like the *Osu,* like the *Osu* they must marry within their social group

Caught between the demands of two cultural worlds, Courtuma shows his awareness that Ona might refuse their dictates on her life. Correctly, he attributes such a possible disposition to her acquisition of a white man's education and her growing sense of liberation. It is the awareness of the potential of white man's education to disrupt his dominant hold over the daughter that makes him seek other alternatives to contain her. In presenting the complex social relationships produced by the encounter between modern and traditional forces, Onwueme prepares her spectators for an inevitable cultural clash. It is hard to understand why a staunchly traditional father would expect his modern, educated daughter to conform to traditional practices whose intrinsic significance is in conflict with the opportunities offered by education. By embracing two cultures with different world views in his household, and expecting that he will still command patriarchal authority, Courtuma seems to be oblivious of the implication of his action. Onwueme, however, does not make him an ignorant, fanatical follower of

traditionalism. Instead, she presents him as one who is cognizant of the social-cultural fissures that the new forces are likely to cause.

> COURTUMA: Times are changing, and we must not pretend as if the harmattan wind cannot char our skin, too. Ona has acquired the white man's knowledge and wisdom which is good for us in many respects. But at times, our customs are too entrenched, too old to bend or be married to the new ways. What we achieve by sending Ona to school at all is to make up in terms of our lack of number. That we may not die wanting and longing to enter a car owned by other people's children, who know and who can tap the tree of the white man's wealth. (34)

Courtuma's philosophy of the value of 'white man's education' to his daughter, and Africans in general, is understandable. What is difficult to accept is his expectation that Ona will embrace the very customs he has acknowledged as too entrenched, unbendable, and incompatible with the modern ways. In this respect, he joins a number of male parents represented in African fiction and drama as expecting total conformity from their children, despite sending them to missionary schools. The futility of such demands is encapsulated by an Ibo proverb that states that he who brings ant-infested faggots should not complain when the lizards visit his hut. Seen in this light, Courtuma's expectation to maintain and consolidate his assertive patriarchal role in the presence of the emergent modern forces is irrational. There are certain cultural practices and privileges he might be forced to give up, such as being the indisputable decision-maker in the home in matters affecting every member of the household. By exhibiting no signs of permitting

his daughter any mobility outside his vicinity, Courtuma hopes to demarcate and influence his daughter's boundaries of personal freedom. Under such a set-up, an examination of the play's sex/gender hierarchy become central in understanding who has the power, who exercises it, and to what effect.

In the dialogue that ensues between Courtuma and his daughter, one can argue that he attempts to construct her as his scopophilic Other. He has indeed reduced her to being an object of his desire as seen in his expressions, which are full of sexual innuendoes. Since "specularizing" her body gives him pleasure, as seen in his disapproval of her 'untidiness' when she comes to ask for permission to go to church, his refusal to let her go cannot be interpreted as anything else but his paranoia that he might lose her to somebody else. This would explain why Ona's mention of going to confession speedily brings into his mind other males who might be potential rivals, in this case the priests.

COURTUMA: Confession? What for? What is your sin? The sin of not going to confession last week. You are incapable of sinning, my Jewel. Forget it. There is nothing like that where you are. Don't allow all these so-called priests who wear long gowns like women to bog you down with weights of rules and irrelevant doctrines.

ONA: Papa, you must let me. Otherwise, I can't receive holy communion on Sunday.

COURTUMA: That is better. Don't let it bother you. I will brew you the best palm wine in Isah, and we can buy biscuits, too. Time was when I did

> that because we wanted a child. White man's communion? (*Spits with disgust*) I have seen the cassock, my dear child, and I can show you that what that priest has in them, I have, too. If he, another man, can forgive your sin and hold you captive with his biscuits and wine, *what wonders would the power of juice from - a loving father not do.* (37) (Emphasis mine)

Obsessed with his daughter, in an ambiguous father-daughter relationship, Courtuma views as a potential rival, any male who intends to endear himself to his daughter For instance, by associating the priests, whom Ona wants to visit, with women -- a term he uses pejoratively due to their wearing of long gowns, he aims to impress upon his daughter their unsuitability.

In his zealous efforts to contain the new modern forces as symbolized by his daughter, Courtuma goes to the extreme. This is evident when Diaku visits in the evening. It is a stubborn and somewhat naive Courtuma who insults him and refuses to leave him alone with his daughter, arguing that his daughter's virtue might be stolen by pretentious Christians. In the struggle with her predicament, Ona uses every possible means to frustrate the controlling gaze of her father. Courtuma's action of pulling the curtain in Ona's bedroom in order to see what is happening between her and Diaku shows how neurotic he is. His deeds are exaggerated in order to show the ludicrous steps the older traditional generation will make in order to tether the younger modern generation. Such a dramatic style appears to be contrived and comical, and has therefore the tendency to downplay the seriousness of the inherent conflict. However, the fact that

both Ona and Diaku succeed in having fun under the very nose of a watchful father shows the capacity of those who are marginalized to subvert the hegemonic power being wielded. The determination of Ona and Diaku to face the 'oppressor' and subvert his oppressive strategies becomes a positive step towards self-empowerment.

When Diaku pays a secretive midnight visit, he is happy that the ubiquitous father is not nearby. Soon after, the spectators hear Courtuma making sexual grunts in his sleep: "Ona! Come. I am your father ... I will confirm you - you *with my own oil. Life-giving juice* to anoint you. I who gave you life. I can give you the *cream and seed of life*. Ona! Stop! Don't go. Don't do it. *Do you doubt* my *power*?" (46) (Italics mine). With a father like Courtuma, Ona becomes a victim of both male desire and the traditions which her father quotes in forbidding her to marry outside the family. To the extent that she is denied the chance to choose her future partner, Ona becomes a powerless female in a hierarchical society where women do not have a voice over their bodies or sexuality. She is therefore marked as a sacrificial lamb at the altar of existing traditions whose purpose is to fulfil the whims and desires of men. In the process, she ends up joining other female characters in African literature who have been represented as victims of similar traditional values. Two popular examples of such female characters are Lawino, in Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and Amope, in Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero*.

Despite her initial portrayal as an objectified "Other", Ona shows her resilience by deciding to confront the patriarchal structures. In this sense, she reinforces Ogundipe-Leslie's assertion that retrogressive traditions are one of the mountains that African women carry on their backs. In her paper, "The Woman's Condition in Africa:

The Six Mountains on her Back," Ogundipe-Leslie, a self-declared materialist feminist, contends that men are not eager to abandon obsolete cultural practices because authority, power and domination are guaranteed with the social structures:

> The woman has to throw off the fifth mountain on her back which is man, who is steeped in his centuries-old attitudes of patriarchy which he does not want to abandon because male domination is advantageous to him. Not even the most politically progressive men are completely free from patriarchal attitudes and feelings of male superiority. Thus it is up to women to combat their social disabilities, to fight for their own fundamental and democratic rights, without waiting for the happy day when men will willingly share power and privilege with them - a day that will never come. (11)

Such a position is essential in understanding the onerous challenge that a character like Ona has to undergo. Like the men Ogundipe-Leslie talks about, Ona's father is unwilling to abandon his beliefs about an *Idegbe* child, despite the changes that Western educational values has introduced in Ibo's socio-cultural lifestyle. His refusal to allow Ona to make her own choice about her future partner reinforces Ogundipe-Leslie's assertion that men are unwilling to relinquish patriarchal privileges. However, Ogundipe-Leslie's assertion is at the same time over-simplistic, for it fails to recognize that there have been men whom even feminist writers have acknowledged as having tried to confront their privileged statuses (Davies and Graves, 11-12; Akubueze, 48; Stratton, 167).

To understand how Courtuma's attachment to tradition effaces female power, voice, and choice in a society like Idu's in *The Broken Calabash*, it is important to examine the theory of homosocial desire. Male homosocial desire has been defined by Sedgwick, its main proponent, as the "the whole spectrum of bonds between men, including friendship, mentorship, rivalry, institutional subordination, homosexuality genitality and economic exchange" (227). Within such a spectrum, the men in a society enter into a bonded relationship. In *The Broken Calabash*, one of the main conflicts that emerges is the occasion when Otu's clan (the *Osu*) contemplate establishing a bond between them and Courtuma's clan through the marriage of the children. Among the Ibo, the seriousness of families to have their children marry is marked when the bridegroom's family makes a formal application by bringing a pot or calabash of palm liquor (Uchendu, 52). If the bride's family gives the consent, the settlement of "bridewealth" follows. It is during this stage that the exchange of women comes into play: "People discuss the good and bad qualities of the bride. Members of the girl's lineage increase the "bridewealth" and the lineage of the bridegroom diminishes it" (Uchendu, 52).

Otu's dialogue with Courtuma is a meta-narrative between two males, which pretends to include the bride, but precludes Ona, as she does not feature anywhere in sight: "Well, my friend, Courtuma, I have always admired you - your courage, your fortitude, your honesty, and your grace. You have been a long-standing friend, and now my son here wishes to canonize that by what I hear. We have seen the beautiful flower in your compound, and we wish you let us pluck it" (48). From this speech, it is evident

that the men are in control of marital transactions. The presence of Diaku as the prospective bridegroom raises the question of the whereabouts of his prospective bride. Even though Courtuma stalls further negotiations by ruling out any marital ties with the *Osus,* the absence of women in this context underscores the liminality of women, especially when their social roles are at stake.

Diaku's mother, for instance, is physically absent throughout the play. At least an appearance or reference about her would be expected by spectators unless it were to be assumed that Diaku is motherless. Ugo's mother too, is conspicuously absent. By representing the mothers' physical absence, or consigning the presence of Courtuma's wife, Oliaku, to the margins of male discussions, Onwueme portrays a social entity where social relations and structures concerning women are unfavorable. Such marginalization of female characters from the stage and the material world needs to be constantly interrogated if they are to realize their potential of empowerment.

Strategic attempts by dominant males to dictate what women should and should not do as exemplified by Courtuma are what keeps the gender system in place (Tong, 220-222). In trying to explain the gender-system, Jacques Lacan employs the concept of Symbolic Order which is a development of Sigmund Freud's theory of superego. For anyone to function adequately within the society argued Lacan, internalization of the Symbolic Order was a necessity. According to him, the Symbolic Order governs society, through the regulation of individuals and, as long as individuals speak the language of Symbolic Order and internalize its gender and sexual roles, society is bound to reproduce itself in a fairly constant form (Lacan, 64-66).

When applied to *The Broken Calabash*, Lacan's theory of the Symbolic Order helps to situate the marginalization of the females in the Ibo cultural text. Courtuma's wife Oliaku, for example, emerges as a female subject who has embraced the language of the male Symbolic Order. As a wife, she plays her assigned gender/sex role slavishly. She does not contradict Courtuma at any time in the play, even when he casts aspersions on her intelligence, which he does often. When he demands that she speak to their daughter, she is uncertain about the topic. Upon requesting a specific answer from her husband, Oliaku gets a tongue-lashing. Her submissiveness to Courtuma reminds the spectators of her powerlessness within their marital relationship:

> COURTUMA: Now that Ona is on holidays, you must begin to introduce the topic to her slowly.
>
> OLIAKU: Which topic?
>
> COURTUMA: You surprise me, you know? Each time I discuss with you, you talk like a person while we're still together, but once I turn my back, your brains turns into a basket and empties all its contents. If your tongue is too heavy to speak the white man's language, is there a hole also pierced in your brain to empty all its contents?
>
> OLIAKU: Hmm, call me what you like. My problem is that I'm overwhelmed by my luck. (34)

Oliaku's invitation of further insults in "call me what you like" makes one question the extent to which she is sincere. Her ungrudging acceptance of the insults indicates the extent to which the Symbolic Order has been inscribed in her. In the language of the

Symbolic Order, the sex-gender system that a wife should accept is the 'law of the father', where the male is presumed to be the guardian of wisdom, order, and harmony in the society. Any liberated spectator observing Oliaku's character from the perspective of feminist gender theories will likely judge her as a submissive woman who is reluctant to question her object status in the society. Unlike her modern daughter who protests against 'the father's law,' Oliaku prefers embracing it and is keen to remind her daughter about its importance:

> OLIAKU: Ona, you really amuse me. My parents gave me to your father as a wife. I didn't have to choose him. But you have a choice. I didn't even know him. He used to come to my father at times to help him in the farm. I thought they were friends. Then, one day, I was told that they had come to pay my dowry. But Ona, yours is different. You have a choice. (34)

By her own admission, Oliaku illustrates how a patriarchal society can control women's voices and desires and inculcate them with a false consciousness that women submission is for the society's good. Oliaku's argument that Ona is privileged to make a personal choice is misleading. If Ona has a choice, it is the one her father wants her to make. Such a forced choice is based on the fact that she is a female who should be submissive to the powerful kinship system. Her decision to appropriate the site of silence/confinement, which is how the society defines her, assists her in challenging the father's attempt to control her. In breaking her silence, Ona joins other heroines in African drama who succeed in challenging degrading cultural practices. Examples of her

contemporary fictional heroines would be: Simi in Soyinka's *The Jewel*; *Anowa* in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* or the nameless female character simply known as 'Woman' in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi.*

Ona's refusal to bow down to the Symbolic Order and the restrictive world of her father should be interpreted as a political gesture that leads to self-creation. The process of self-creation, for which Ona strives, does not come without its difficulties, for she has to battle with conflicting situations within and outside of her life. Her desire to be a modern woman, conscious of her rights as an individual/woman, and her determination to fight for these rights are confounded by the fact that she is an only female child who cannot marry outside her own family. Consequently, she finds herself torn between demands of modern and traditional forces:

> ONA: Each time this fire wells up in my mind, he comes to pour cold water on it with his words, his touch. It is good for me to have such a dedicated father. I wish God gives me a husband like him, my father... *(Revolting)* But must all my life revolve around him so? So circumscribed by him? Must I never live my life independent of him? Must he always leave his mark on me? At school it is father. At home father. At play? Fa - Why can't I be independent? Oh my father, how I love you and cherish you. But why must you tear me away from myself? Or is that a penalty for loving you? (38)

These numerous questions are not addressed to anybody in particular. Ona is merely musing on how to contain her predicament. If we were to envision the space within

which they have been asked, it would probably be a silent and contained spatiality. Ugo's appearance in this site just when Ona is undergoing her tortuous moments is meant to be a source of strength. Having always provided sisterly support to Ona, Ugo urges her to leave the site: "See that wall clock. Is it static? No! Then we must move on" (40). Unfortunately, Ona is initially unable to move on, because for every step she takes, her father stands in the way. Her friend Ugo too is unable to help further, for when she tries, she is insulted by Ona's father who calls her a whore (42). By insulting her and therefore attacking the sexuality of the female body, Courtuma is exerting his male power.

Ona and Ugo's experiences in *The Broken Calabash* are symbolic of Nigerian women's efforts to assert their individuality in a hierarchical culture. Both strive to tackle their problems with courage and determination, and when they fail, they refuse to give up but continue with the struggle. For instance, when she is together with her boyfriend in the same room as her father, Ona triumphs by fooling Courtuma into believing that they are studying the Bible. Both are taking power in their hands and using it to assert their own needs. Their triumph, however, does not last long, for the father denies Ona the chance to go to confession rite, a pretext for meeting Diaku again. Should Ona be described essentially as a victim of a traditional culture that is exercised by her father? A simplistic analysis might define her as a "victim", but Mohanty cautions against labeling of people as victims, powerless or oppressed (261-263) without verifying the socio-cultural contexts. When such labeling and naming occurs, usually it is the dominant power trying to assert its authority by 'giving', which implies that the

labeled subject is lacking part of its identity. Such a construction she argues, only helps to reify the hierarchy of power relations.

In her first candid conversation with her father, Ona emerges as a female character who refuses the label 'victim' (54-57). Behind the anger at her father's refusal to have her marry Diaku, we can read Onwueme's stance against the silencing of women. Like numerous African writers who have questioned oppressive traditional practices, Onwueme deliberately gives her protagonist the will to resist after portraying her going through agonizing decisions on where her loyalty should lie. Ona emerges determined to rebel against patriarchal conventions that subsume her female identity. By speaking against her own oppression, Ona starts succeeding in subverting the Symbolic Order responsible for "effeminizing" women. In her rejoinders directed at her father, lies a harsh critique of hegemonic traditional practices which she has been forced to follow against her own will:

> ONA: I see. You people have a very ambitious murder plan. You will not slaughter me on the altar of your decadent tradition, but would also want another female head. I say to hell with your tradition. Homestead! Norm! All! Let the wind blow - let the shaky homestead be blown. Anything that cannot stand the force of change must be uprooted or be blown into oblivion by the storm heralding the new season. (56)

In this diatribe against tradition, Ona contradicts the notion of the "New Woman" espoused by feminist critics of African Literature. For example, Katherine Frank, the proponent of this generalization, posits that this "New Woman" appears caught in a

dilemma, and " wavers helplessly between the allegiance to her culture - her African identity and her aspiration for freedom and self-fulfillment" (17-18). Frank's analysis of African feminist works has been dismissed as spurious by African feminists who feel that she has adopted a simplistic approach towards complex and dynamic African societies (Newell, 13, 20). Unlike Frank, Mineke Schipper does not view modern African woman as trapped, and helplessly waiting for help, probably from a man. In "Mother Africa on a Pedestal: The Male Heritage in African Literature and Criticism," Schipper critiques the negative portrayal of female characters when they identify with the modern values rather than traditional ones (42-43). A conservative male-centred criticism of Ona's character, for instance, would generally accuse her of desecrating her traditions. Schipper's concern is that such a critique pays little consideration to the fact that idealization of culture does little to confront forces opposed to female agency. Seen in this light, Ona's decision to hit back at her father should be interpreted as positive gesture intended to lead her towards freedom and empowerment.

The presence of the Dibia following Courtuma's act of breaking the calabash leads to the climax of the play. As a respected elder, he accuses Courtuma of defiling the traditions of the land. He informs Courtuma that courtesy demands that he treat with respect any group of people who come to ask for the daughter's hand. Extremities, such as breaking the calabash full of palm wine, and brought in good faith, demand a penalty. But Courtuma's nemesis does not come from the Dibia. Instead, it comes from his daughter, who decides to get even upon learning that the spurned Diaku has gone ahead and married her best friend Ugo. Ona's lament about the distress her father has caused

her reveals the serious limitations placed on women by the sex-gender system. Ugo's marriage to Diaku, itself a form of betrayal to Ona, is another indicator of the oppressive social forces in a society that embraces two contrasting cultures surrounding the women. It has been suggested by gender scholars that one way in which women's oppression can be contained is by feminist consciousness. According to Gerda Lerner, sensitizing women to the need for physical and psychological autonomy is crucial if their marginalization is to be overcome:

> This process of creating feminist consciousness has something, but by no means everything to do with the quest for women rights, equality, and justice – it has a great deal to do with the search for autonomy … Autonomy means moving out from a world in which one is born to marginality, to a past without a meaning, and a future determined by others …into a world in which one acts and chooses, aware of a meaningful past and free to shape one's future. (xxiv)

Ona's search for autonomy starts with her refusal to be culturally marked as an *Idegbe*. In the label *Idebge* is the negation or denial of her autonomy and as long as she accepts its power, she will never, to use Lerner's phrase, live in a "world in which one acts and chooses."

As the play comes to an end, Ona is able to move out of her limiting world of obsolete cultural practices into a new modern world of opportunities and personal acts. In the new world, she is able to make political choices for herself. By choosing to speak out against male tyranny soon after receiving Diaku's letter of farewell, Ona portrays a

female who has started finding her voice. It is through such a voice that she vows to act like the town-crier who constantly brings bad news and has to deliver it to the people in the village. Unlike the town-crier whose public mission is protected in the proverb "You do not kill the messenger of bad news," Ona's personal mission is invested with risks. In her resolute decision we see a female character ready to act with agency: "Yes, yes, my father has at last succeeded in ruining my life. But I will show him. Ona will show him pepper ... Yes, yes, I am going to implicate him ... Yes ...Yes ... The wheel must come right round..." (58). The subversive intentions planned ahead here are not those of a neurotic teenager who has been denied a chance to marry her sweetheart. Instead, they are empowering protestations by a female whose life has been circumscribed by male domination.

After the Jester in his drunkenness reveals that Ona has been brought back home pregnant after four months in the university, Courtuma is thunderstruck. Unable to believe that his daughter has become illegitimately pregnant, he consults the oracle in order to find out the man behind the shameful deed. In a revelation similar to the one Oedipus receives from Teiresias on the murder of King Laius, Courtuma is shocked to learn that he is the one responsible for Ona's pregnancy. Desperate to clear his name of this ignominy, he turns to Ona and pleads with her to implicate Diaku, but she reminds him that Diaku has married her best friend Ugo. Countering every effort made by Courtuma to ensure that he remains in control of Ona, Onwueme's heroine remains capable of fighting her oppressor.

Ona's strong will, and her bitterness against being subjected to limiting cultural practices gives her the power to resist male dominance. The failure of Courtuma to heed her protestations is the penalty he is forced to pay. To break the palm-wine calabash can be forgiven as a rash deed by a selfish father, but to confine a daughter to retrogressive traditions for self-serving reasons has to be challenged, and subverted by everyone who values personal autonomy and self-identity. Forsaken by society, cursed by the Dibia and abandoned by his daughter, Courtuma has no alternative left. In death he finds escape but it is a double-edged sword. By choosing to commit another ignominious deed of taking his life, he ends up alienating himself from even his dead ancestors further. Consequently, he cannot be buried decently and his body has to be discarded to the bush where evil spirits dwell.

If, by her play, Onwueme has succeeded in showing the need to discard obsolete tradition if women's subjectivity is to be achieved, then the ending of the *Broken Calabash* is not tragic. Metaphorically, the play succeeds in shifting the female protagonist from the margins of her father's power and culture to a symbolic centre that promises freedom, fulfillment, and empowerment. As spectators, we no longer see Ona as a subservient female character. Instead, we come face to face with a female who acquires respect, power, and subjectivity. In summary, Ona emerges as a female character who undertakes a personal and metaphorical journey, but initially possesses little motivation to fight against her confinement to a male-centred society. Nevertheless, as she develops self-consciousness, and she is able to challenge, resist, and subvert the ideological male world of her father. Through her, Onwueme is able to map

politics of gender representations, as we see Ona's every effort to define who she is, what she wants in life, and how she wants the society to define her.

CHAPTER TWO

The Reign of Wazobia

Wazobia is us.
We are Wazobia (Onwueme, 166).

Onwueme's play, *The Reign of Wazobia* is the third in her trilogy which includes *The Broken Calabash* and *Parables for a Season.* In this play, I move beyond the personal female sphere examined in Chapter One to a public one. I examine the controversial situation and the subsequent rebellion that arises when Wazobia, a woman, is enthroned as their "King". By looking at the intersections of power, class, gender, and social structures in *The Reign of Wazobia* will help in understanding the liminal status of women. Through the central character, Wazobia, I interrogate the notion that particular roles or tasks universally belong to either men or women.

In this chapter, I use various feminist theories of representation with the intention of showing Onwueme's contribution to raising issues of gender politics in Africa drama. Specifically, my theoretical framework relies heavily on feminist film theorists' treatment of the gaze, and Bertolt Brecht's theory of alienation, as applied by materialist feminists to dramatic theory. In feminist film theory, I use Laura Mulvey's argument on how film offers visual pleasure by fetishitizing the women as objects to be looked at for the visual pleasure of male spectator (Mulvey, 43). I show how Wazobia and her female servants confront positionings that situate men as the active subjects and women as passive objects to be looked at. Brecht's alienation theory is useful too, for it helps the spectators to be critical of the production of ideologies immanent in representational

apparatus (Brecht, 94-96). This theory is also critical in understanding why Onwueme structures her work in a very non-linear dramatic form.

Based on the Bendel Ibo kingship system, and modelled on an actual historical event in Nigeria, *The Reign of Wazobia* dramatizes the enthronement of Wazobia as the surrogate-king soon after the death of the male King. As a temporary position, she is expected to rule for three seasons before a male-king is eventually chosen. Disgruntled male chiefs who argue that a woman should not lead them in the first place resist the choice of Wazobia, and her subsequent enthronement. Consequently, two ambitious male chiefs, Iyase and Idehen conspire with the late king's wives, now Wazobia's queens, to unseat her by publicly presenting a calabash of hot steaming herbs to her.

Culturally, such a presentation is a vote of "no confidence by" the people, and a subtle piece of advice for the king to disappear into the evil forest. Having drummed up feelings against Wazobia, Iyase leads a riotous crowd of men into the place and places the disguised "present" into Wazobia's hands. Just when he is about to tell why they have brought it to her, a loyal "army" of female servants storm into the palace shouting war cries. Confused and terrified, Iyase's men retreat and stagger out of the palace in panic. In the process, he is caught in the ambush and is almost forced to drink the concoction. Fortunately, Wazobia intercepts her servants, thus pre-empting their inclination towards vengeance. She decides that peace, rather than violence, will characterize her reign, and as the play ends, all the women dance around chanting "Long live Wazobia".

Like the rest of Onwueme's plays, *The Reign of Wazobia* opens with a prologue

whose purpose is to set up King Wazobia's eventual refusal to be dethroned. The stage directions in the prologue help to underscore the marginalization of women from the realm of political social systems. As the play opens, focus is on the late king, Obi-0giso, who has died. Even though he is not physically present, we are able to read his presence in the absence. Through the placement of the empty throne on the centre stage and an effigy of the late king beside it, a powerful message is sent. According to the Ibo mythology, the king still continues to exercise authority both in life and death. However, a substitute king has to be chosen to replace him for three seasons before a new male king is finally enthroned.

The portrayal of Wazobia in an equidistant position between the palace throne and surrounding huts making the community (126) is significant, for it highlights her proximity to political power. However, placing women in a selected position of power and privilege does not necessarily mean that they end up being "empowered." It is in this context that I reveal a unique form of "African gaze." Here, I adapt Mulvey's theory of the male gaze to an African situation to conceptualize how King Wazobia's determination to remain on the throne frustrates the male chiefs who have put her there as an object to gaze at and later depose.

In addressing the subject of representational strategies in classical cinema, Mulvey argues that it is through scopophilia, or pleasure delivered from looking at the female body, that the subject positioning of the male spectator operates (6). Using both Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey postulates that cinematic tools encode ideologically gender-marked meanings by controlling the relationship between

the spectacle and the spectator. Through the "male gaze", which is another way of reading scopophilic genres such as voyeurism or fetishism, Mulvey comes up with a critique of cinematic representation. For her, cinematic narratives are structured in such a way that a series of "looks" would be exchanged between the actors, the camera's gaze at the actors, and the constructed look assigned to the spectator (Dolán, 13). This spectator, who has been identified by Dolan as white, middle-class, heterosexual and male (2), is usually addressed as the active subject and encouraged to identify with the male hero in the narrative (de Lauretis, 103-57). In Lacanian analysis, such an image of the female is denied subjectivity because it is merely defined as "the lack".

The importance of this theory to dramatic performance lies in its interrogation of traditional representational strategies. Its call for disruption of the visual pleasure inherent in the male gaze helps us to situate Wazobia as a female character, operating from a master narrative that is being controlled by men. By opening the play with a prologue which foreshadows the play's final decision by the women not to delegate their political power, Onwueme foregrounds her intention of disrupting the dominant ideology of illusionist texts. This strategy, associated with Brecht's epic theatre (Brecht, 70-71, 84-86), is based on the premise that estranging the spectator from the conditions of life outlined by the representation denaturalizes the ideologies circulating through an illusionist text.

In this prologue, Wazobia as the new King is portrayed in the midst of dancing women. These women, she realizes, have been enticed by the masquerade (a male performer symbolizing dead ancestors) in its performance of a degrading "backward

dance." The dance itself involves moving in backward steps. Upon realizing her unconscious complicity in performing this degrading dance, Wazobia abruptly stops dancing, and shakes off the hypnotic effect of the dance, bringing the drumming to a halt. The masquerade leaves fuming with anger and a warning glare while in the background, the voices of women chant "Wazobia", "Wazobia" (127). In the address, which she delivers immediately, Wazobia asks her counterparts to prove that they are not the weaklings the men consider them to be. Upon her words, the women strip naked as a sign of revolt, and line the palace walls, ready to ambush the traitorous men who want to usurp Wazobia' throne.

The gesture of voluntarily baring the female body is considered an anathema in African societies, and no male is brave enough to look at the nude female body. Normally understood as a taboo, female nudity exposes to the male beholder his entry point into the body of Mother Earth, and thus, such gazing is equated to beholding one's own biological mother's nakedness. When the leading traitors, Iyase and Idehen, storm the palace and complacently announce that they have come to bring a present "from the people/to end your reign of terror"(128), they are extremely shocked. Rather than finding a "feminine" King, they discover a forceful king who blares out an order "for the tigers to come out." (174). Surprised by this maneuver, the men find themselves outnumbered, and take the only chance left- a fast retreat, but not before the female servants pursue and arrest the key leaders of the insurrection.

By having the female characters refuse to take part in the backward dance, Onwueme challenges male practices, whose chief purpose is to manipulate women into

believing that they are mutual sharers of power in the society. Through Wazobia's disruption of the dance, Onwueme speaks against rituals which incorporate women by pretending to be egalitarian in nature, but in reality are meant to serve the interests of men. Toril Moi's warning that "as long as the master's scopophilia, love of looking remains satisfied, his domination is secure"(132) becomes appropriate in the play's context. With the male pleasure (the dance) disrupted by the fetishitized object (Wazobia and the rest of women), a path is set for the inscription of subjectivity into the women's consciousness.

A critical interpretation of Wazobia's speech in the prologue brings out various political objectives when theatre is taken as a dominant system with its own ideologies. According to Nancy Reinhardt, "[the] dominant public action both on stage and in the audience stresses a male world in which women are kept either to the sides, in recess, or are placed on display for the male viewer"(22-29). Reinhardt's position speaks directly to the representational political space Wazobia finds herself in. It is a space where men define women in terms of "lack," a term Lacan made popular. Nevertheless, in her speech, she reconstructs the space by mimicking the way men have conceptualized women.

WAZOBIA: Arise, women!
They say your feet are feeble,
Show them those feet carry the burden of the womb.
They say your hands are frail,
Show them those hands have claws

Show them those hands are heavy.

Wake up, women!

Arise, women! (127)

Such a male perception of the female permeates the influential psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan, which construct women as objects of male desire. A look at Wazobia's position from this perspective is useful in situating her in the drama. As the substitute king, she is viewed by the male chiefs in terms of "lack." When she highlights the 'not-male' qualities in her speech of exhortation, Wazobia harps on the meanings that have been written on the female bodies. In her speech lies the unstated, unspoken knowing that the ideology behind "othering" of the woman as "lack" is meant to justify that women cannot hold positions of political power, because they do not have the qualities that make men.

It is this limiting and therefore oppressive definition of women as the "other" of men that the female character Wazobia interrogates. Although Onwueme withholds the details of what happens to the ambushed men in the prologue, she succeeds in staging a decentred spectacle at the last Movement of the play. Here, she lets the ambitious male chiefs get as far as they think they can, only to disrupt them at the climax of their pleasurable gazing. By foregrounding this subversion in the play's prologue, Onwueme is demonstrating the females' capacity to both question and subvert predominant male structures.

The interrogation and subversion of the male structures in the play takes the form of disruption of two types of pleasures. Stylistically, the spectator is denied the chance

to identify with the omniscient authority of the linear narrative when Onwueme uses a non-linear plot punctuated occasionally by songs, dances, rituals and flashbacks. Through such a technique, she is able for a strategic while to keep the spectators unaware of who Iyase and Idehen are, what position they hold in the kingdom, and why they are eager to depose Wazobia. In the denaturalization of their identity and the incompleteness of the time period, the spectator is not called upon to identify with them, but rather to examine critically how the successive events in the play will lead to an explicit explanation of their identity, motives, and dramatic function.

The second denial of pleasure is evident in the abrupt interruption of the backward dance. In its intrinsic worth, the dance is represented by its leader, the masquerade, as being for the good of the women, but Wazobia contests this assertion and calls it off when she realizes the hidden but dominant ideology behind it. By stopping the 'backward dance' and commenting about men's anticipation of their women's participation in it, Wazobia is portrayed as making an unprecedented move when she tells the women; "For ages you have been dancing to feast the eyes of licentious men and / visiting generals. / Dance no more" (132). According to Wazobia, women's bodies have been sexual sites for voyeurism, especially during the cultural dances. For her, the dances are an oppressive site of representation where women's subjectivity ceases to exist and therefore must be done away with.

Wazobia's argument that "the gyrations" of the women have done nothing apart from presenting visiting generals with a "feast for the eyes"(132) echoes Mulvey's concept of scopophilia where the female body is a site for voyeurism and fetishism. In

her attempt to rationalize the way men have ideologically maintained their supremacy, Wazobia is shown to be aware of the jealousy through which men want to protect political power as if it was destined for them. O[redacted]ueme, succeeds in presenting a female character who not only unmasks men's unwillingness to share power, but goes further, to argue that even when power is shared, men know they may take it back when it suits them.

> WAZOBIA: When will you learn?
> Pause awhile. Ask yourself
> Why the law prescribes a female regent
> Where are the men
> If rulership is the sole preserve of men?
> Do you think they contradict themselves when
> They make the female regent rule for only
> Three seasons when a king passes beyond?
> They plant us as king unasked
> And supplant us at will. (132)

In this speech, Onwueme questions the male tradition of romanticizing the role of women in a society but doing nothing substantially to empower them. By presenting Wazobia as the defiant woman who challenges the ageless conventions, Onwueme portrays the determination of the women to overcome all odds against their lives. As spectators, we start seeing Wazobia as a determined female who is unwilling to be gendered as "feminine," the kind of character that Brown suggests is found in feminist

drama is marked where female characters pursue autonomy in hierarchical social systems.

Having marked the determination of Wazobia to stay in power regardless of the men's threats, Onwueme takes her spectators back to the occasion of Wazobia's coronation. Stylistically, she depends on the use of flashbacks. If the play's prologue provides the first disruption of the dominant linear narrative structure, the flashback in Movement One introduces the second. In her use of the flashback technique to show how Wazobia's coronation was performed, Onwueme relies on Brechtian technique of demonstration rather than representation (Brecht, 121-129). Brecht's technique is important in feminist theatre, because he proposes that exposing ideological points of view should be the principal concern of theatrical experience. Of considerable import is his prescription that spectators should not be allowed to act passively before institutionalized representational apparatuses. Instead, he posits that they ought to question the interactions and relationships portrayed. Rather than yield to the seduction of a realist illusionist text, which would probably happen if Wazobia were to narrate the events herself, Onwueme invites the spectators to take a position that Dolan articulates so well: "a critical, reflective position in order to disrupt the process of identification that normally pulls the spectators through the text, subjecting him/her to the authority of narrative closure" (Dolan, 106). In the stage directions quoted below the audience is taken from the play's "now", which at this juncture is Wazobia's musing about male greed for power to the "past's" event of coronation. This technique helps Onwueme to maintain a non-linear dramatic style as spectators becomes called to become critical of

the events presentation rather than passive consumers:

> WAZOBIA: They of their volition threw the throne on
>
> My lap, and lap it I must....
>
> *Clapping of cymbals, drums mixed with xylophone are heard. Fade out on Wazobia for flashback. Light changes to bluish green, filters to orange, until it spreads to red, filling the entire stage. The atmosphere is evidently charged. The clouds are laden with foreboding air of tension. The air is so thick you can cut it. It is the night of Wazobia's coronation as king surrogate or regent to the throne of Ilaa in Anioma kingdom.* (132)

If in this flashback Onwueme foregrounds Wazobia's coronation as an event from which the audience can no longer detach themselves as unseen spectators, it is in the subsequent ritual that she questions the exclusion of women, especially those with recognized social titles. In presenting the Ifejoku ritual, a sacrifice directed at two deities, Ifejoku and Onokwu, imploring them to help the *men* reach a decision on the dead king's successor, Onwueme depicts male unwillingness to accommodate women. The ritual itself becomes a power struggle among the two priests of Ani, and Ohene and Omu, whom they have failed to invite to the ceremony.

It is in this respect that the confrontation between Omu and the priests ought to be understood. Omu, constantly referred to as "Her Royal Highness, King of Women" rightly challenges her exclusion from the Ifejoku ritual, because she is convinced their motive is suspect. Presented as another formidable female character in the play, Omu symbolizes the women who refuse peripheral consignment when serious issues that affect

the welfare of the whole community are debated. This refusal is captured in her altercation with the priests who do not hide their sexist attitude, despite her revered title. In their verbal duel, Onwueme poses difficult questions that I consider central to questioning the issues of female exclusion and concomitant male domination:

PRIEST OF ANI: I know the direction of your accusing finger.
Haa, women,
No matter how much you try to elevate them,
Never rise above petty squabbles.

OMU: And you call me woman?
I, the Omu, surpassed all women,
King among women? (134)

PRIEST OF ANI: King among women
But woman all the same
No matter how, I still smell the woman in you.

OMU: And is that why you must leave me out of
such important rituals as Ifejoku?

ANI: Since when did women become the pillars of the state? (134)

In this verbal exchange, Ani's priest prefers to see Omu in terms of what she is not-his 'Other', the 'not-man', because by objectifying her he can guarantee himself that she will not threaten his attempt to consolidate his power. This explains the contempt behind the line, "King among women, but woman all the same. No matter how, I still smell woman in you" (134). Like a number of male characters in Onwueme's plays, the

Priest of Ani is overtly sexist towards women. Since his office is a culturally respected one, it is unfortunate that his chauvinist and sexist ideas are the pillars of his reasoning. In a number of plays written by African men where males humiliate female characters, the natural response by these characters is either to keep silent, or retaliate through feeble and ineffective protestations. Onwueme's, *The Reign of Wazobia* on the other hand, sets out to break these types of silence and protestations. Like Wazobia, Omu refuses to be cowed by the men and instead uses her equally powerful position to confront the priest.

Omu's powerful protestations echo concerns about female exclusion from dominant modes of representations. Loren Kruger observes satirically that women have always made spectacles *of* themselves in theatre but goes on to note that in the past decade they have started making spectacles themselves (15). By standing up against Ani's priest, the "King of Women" makes a spectacle herself; nowhere is this as carefully captured than by her deafening shout of "enough" (135), a gesture indicating how fed up she is with the priest's convoluted display of male power. The retort too is another refusal to inhabit the "discourse text" that the priest has created for her and the other women, whom she leads. However, the question must be asked. Is Omu furious with her exclusion because she sees it as a male attempt to isolate her from influential practices of the community? In other words, are Omu's protests clouded by personal pursuit of prestige, or do they reflect her overall concern with women's exclusion in the society? I shall return to this question when I start analyzing all the forces being rallied to oust Wazobia from power.

There are a number of challenges that Wazobia faces in her efforts to exercise her authority as a woman. Even though Onwueme tells us that after her enthronement, she ceases dressing up as a woman in public and appears in "kingly regalia." In a male-dominated society like the Anioma kingdom, it is not surprising that the men would find it hard to approve a female's coronation. In situations where women are permitted to exercise some political power, it would be natural to expect a lot of solidarity and support from other women. Unfortunately, this is not the case with Wazobia. While there are loyal women who are glad to have Wazobia as their new king, there are those such as Omu or the two former wives of King Ogiso, who are not happy that power has been bestowed on an ordinary woman. Wazobia to them is *a persona non grata* who does not even carry the honor of being a queen or Omu like them.

In introducing the issue of class, Onwueme widens the debate around women's marginalization in social and political systems. It is not now a matter of men shutting women out, but also women undermining other women's attempts to make it to the top. Onwueme seems to be saying that in their efforts to compete for power with men, women will do everything to avoid confronting men and resort instead to maligning their own gender. She demonstrates that in some patriarchal hierarchical societies, some women will be offered token power as an exception to the rule. Since this argument is similar to the one she makes in *The Broken Calabash*, Onwueme's interrogation of women's exclusion must be viewed as not merely concerned with checking male control, but also as pointing out the effects of social relations and material conditions on women.

Before analyzing why Onwueme portrays women with higher statuses as rebels

against the reign of King Wazobia, it is vital to distinguish between those who are for and against her rule. Not all the "wives" or queens of Wazobia are portrayed as rebellious, jealous, or resentful towards Wazobia as their substitute king and husband. Bia and Zo, for instance, do not harbor any misgivings about the fact that Wazobia has risen from a simple ordinary maiden to a surrogate king. To them, she has been chosen in a sanctioned ceremony conducted by the respected priest of Ohene. It is the other co-wives, especially Ahene, the most senior wife and Wa, who feel slighted that power has gone into the wrong hands and bypassed them. On the other hand, it is Omu, who though not going for the political throne, wants the widows to undergo traditional funeral rites. Finding herself pitted against Wazobia who refuses to have the rites performed on her wives, Omu tries to undermine everything that Wazobia does in her efforts to uplift the women.

The attempt by Wa, Anehe and Omu to alienate Wazobia from the people she leads becomes a central issue in understanding the play's position about women. Why does Onwueme have female characters opposed to female leadership, while one would expect a lot of support coming from her gender? At one level, this question seems unnecessary. One may argue against it with the counter-remark that not all men will support a male leader just because he is male.

According to power relations and social conditions in Anioma kingdom, anybody who assumes power is naturally viewed as a powerful, prestigious or valuable political figure. To ascend to that position implies reaping other benefits attached, and it is the shattering of the possibility of getting the benefits that make the two queens act

treacherously against Wazobia. Wazobia's promotion from the margins of power to central power is a serious blow to them. This would explain why they are not only willing, given the choice to take over her power, but also willing to collaborate with anyone wanting to bring Wazobia down. The issue of women fighting, blocking and undermining other women who gain positions of power should not be oversimplified. It does not happen just because the nature of women calls them to oppose other women. Instead, it should be seen from the perspective of a category of an inferiorized group that has been denied public positions by the dominant male world.

It is from this perspective that an African theorist, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, categorizes the six mountains that oppress the African women. According to her, the sixth mountain faced by the African woman is "women" . Her argument is that internalization of women's objectivity has done little to erase women's marginalization: "Their [women's] own reactions to objective problems therefore are often self-defeating and self-crippling. Woman reacts with fear, dependency complexes and attitudes to please and cajole where more assertive actions are needed" (36). Rather than offer Wazobia support, Onwueme's three female characters are complicit in the efforts by the men to dispense with her female leadership. Whereas their personal vendetta against Wazobia play a part in their alignment with antagonistic male leadership, the three are portrayed as predisposed to this attitude by the social structures under which they are living.

By making the efforts by Anehe and Wa to alienate Wazobia fail, Onwueme introduces gender politics in a very powerful way. Their determination to undermine

Wazobia is countered by Bia and Zo's decision to stand solidly behind the newly anointed king. Bia and Zo's function is further supported by the introduction of the drummer during the traditional *ituafa,* a praise singing ceremony where encomiums are chanted highlighting the unique qualities of the recipient, in this case Wazobia. Through praises such as "Here comes the lion", "The one who has the heart of a gun", "The one whose feet cause sudden tremors in the forest", or "house of dry stick which remains standing / when everyone expects it to fall" (141-142), Onwueme deflects the mudslinging that has been targeted at Wazobia. In the process, she helps to reinforce Wazobia's unique leadership qualities.

Her distinct character is revealed when she asks the kneeling queens to stand up. As a king and a woman, she refuses to accept obeisance from her "wives" who have come to attract the attention of the "husband" by offering her their dishes. Wazobia's speech is loaded with political action that contradicts Ogundipe-Leslie's description of women's self-defeating and self-crippling attitude:

ANEHE: My king!

WA: (*Kneeling and thrusting her dish forward, too*) Eat, mine is the sweetest!

ZO: Eat, my king!

BIA: Mine, my king

(*Wazobia places her fly whisk/fan three times by way of salute or prayer on the head of each of the women. Brief pause.)*

WAZOBIA: Rise, rise-my faithful ones.

Lest you sprain your knees.

It is no time to kneel but time to stand.

(*The women rise, and WAZOBIA beckons them to sit down*)

It is no time to succumb but to stand, my women. It is no time to gloat on praises, women. The task ahead calls for abstinence and sacrifice. (142)

Wazobia's revolutionary but practical attitude towards her "wives" is the kind of positive action that has been called for by most African feminist scholars. What is positive about it is the fact that she questions and therefore disrupts the "wives" definition of their roles. Through Wazobia, Onwueme makes a political statement that if women stopped defining themselves in relation to men and their dependence on them, then it might be possible to start establishing their independence in a system that is male-dominated. Wazobia's invitation to the three "wives" is by extension an invitation not only to Ibo women in Nigeria, but to all African women, to rise above their fears and their self-deprecating desires to please men at their own expense. It is an African gesture of female solidarity, the only strategy that can effectively disrupt and deconstruct women's oppression. Such an invitation is also extended to Omu, who initially fails to side with her female king.

To understand Omu's rude and aggressive entrance into the palace square, we need to look at the effect she has on the female queens, characters who have started leaving the "margins of power" as they journey towards the "centres of empowerment". Her disrespectful address to the surrogate king and her ravings about the women surrounding the king sends shivers down the spine of the women. As the "king of women," Omu is a fearful personality. The stage directions state that: *As soon as the OMU enters, the women who were hitherto relaxed begin to look panicky, falling down*

on their knees to greet her 143.

In Omu's exchange of words with the king, Onwueme presents us not necessarily with two powerful women figures, but rather with the fact that because of being divided against each other by hierarchical male power, women sometimes find themselves locked into a situation with few alternatives. I quote the conflict between Omu and Wazobia so that I can use Omu's standpoint as an argument that she is too entrenched in the male hierarchy to play a positive role in the women's struggle, as she later does towards the end of the play:

> WAZOBIA: May I know what mission brings the Omu, first and mother of women with a tight face, to the royal throne of Anioma?
>
> OMU: And may I ask why the one who supposedly occupies the royal throne of Anioma will not take pains to know the angle the sun seats in the sky. Even a strange hen in a new house stands, one foot up, one foot down, surveying the territory with its ears and eyes... Why, king, do these women sit here at the level of the throne while the chiefs and the entire kingdom await them to make their appearances at marketplace so as to complete the funeral rites for the king that traveled. Why?
>
> WAZOBIA: Why may I ask must the widows be subjected to the torment of incessant funeral rites that men are free of, under similar situations, Omu?

OMU: It is our tradition that women who survive funeral rituals dance in the marketplace as final mark of their innocence regarding their husband's death. A woman who dies mourning is unclean and must be left to rot in the evil forest.

WAZOBIA: (*Arrogantly*)

I see. Omu, My women will not dance naked in public to appease the eyes of a wrathful populace. This is no era for dancing to entertain lustful eyes. (143)

I have quoted at length to show how Omu's entrenchment in traditionalism makes her end up as complicit in women's oppression. Generally, a large number of women have been clearly complicit in the oppression of other women in their active roles as performers of cultural practices such as in clitoridectomy or in foot binding. Omu's defense of traditionalism (144) is a retrogressive step in the struggle that female characters wage against all forms of exclusion, oppression and discrimination. 'Traditionalism' here is distinguished from 'tradition' to refer specifically to oppressive patriarchal practices. By insisting that the widowed queens ought to fulfil the demands by dancing in the market in order to absolve themselves from being involved in the deaths of their husbands, Omu is no different from the traditional male characters who exercise their oppressive powers in different cultural sites. The young man who pursues his wife into the very sanctuary of Wazobia's palace represents is a good example of such males. His wife's escape into Wazobia's palace underscores the gender violence that women have to endure under the guise of traditionalism which men quote to justify

their violent behavior:

MAN: And is that why

A mere woman that I paid to get with my hard-earned money should challenge me in my house?

WAZOBIA: And this is an answer to your king?

MAN: It is no matter for king and subject, but a matter for man and woman. The gods of our land ordained that a man must own a wife to bear him children... (146)

Man's response to the king, shows the commodification of the female body to serve the interests of the men. The intrinsic value of the Man's wife is downplayed here because like the other material possessions of men, she too has been "bought" through the payment of a "brideprice." I use the term "brideprice" here to stress the economic objectification of the female body. If Anioma men are convinced that it is their God-given right to oppress their wives as sexual machines, how is their sexism going to be challenged and undermined? How are women supposed to overcome these conditions if some of them are not keen to disrupt the patriarchal organization of the family, a unit that then forms the basis of the society? The solution towards this problem should lie with re-evaluating the primary function of the family, an undertaking about which many have talked.

The youthful husband who pursues his wife into the palace is a good example of an oppressive family structure. The traditional family has been seen as the place where members are socialized to accept or exercise various forms of oppressions. John Hodge,

a sociologist in emphasizing the role of the family, sees the traditional Western family as a monster which encourages, perpetuates and supports natural oppression: "The traditional Western family, with its authoritarian male rule and its authoritarian adult rule, is the major training ground which initially conditions us to accept group oppression as the natural order" (52). Whereas it is easy to accept the validity of what Hodge says, it is difficult to accept his contention that the Western nuclear family is the only institution which promotes oppression. If we substitute the adjective "Western" with "African" in Hodge's quotation, the crux of his message will remain unchanged. For example, the husband who pursues his wife into the haven of Wazobia's palace is a good example of an oppressor with an African framework. His claim that the beating of his wife, "a mere woman" is his and not a female king's business, is heavily invested with male chauvinism, and is a manifestation that he has unquestioningly bought the argument that "mere women" are there to do men's bidding.

Despite the difficulties placed before Wazobia's leadership by both conservative males and females, she remains determined to shatter all the structures and attitudes that reinforce the female subjugation. Her refusal to tolerate women's oppression in her kingdom, a contrast to Omu's position, reflects her strong opposition to male hegemony. This opposition to oppressive male structures is climactic when she demands that everybody assemble in the village square. In her address, which men try to interrupt by booing and jeering, Wazobia brings out rules that are meant to restructure the social organization and especially the hierarchical system that shut out women and young people from serious deliberations. I quote at length to show how Onwueme presents the

challenges Wazobia has to contain, and how an argument is made that women too can play a very developmental role in the society.

IYASE: Women, no matter what status they claim to have, women are highly provocative.

WAZOBIA: Nobody has asked you to speak Iyase

IYASE: *(stuttering)*

But..., but ...

WAZOBIA: I have the floor. Sit down! Now hear the manifesto...We all, man, woman, child, must be schooled. To actualize these potentials for full benefit, for all with none posing an obstacle to another, with the left hand washing the right, and the right hand the left. Henceforth women will have equal representation in rulership. *(The men grumble and boo to register their disapproval. Women shout, "Long Reign Wazobia")*

Schools will be built

To tutor women and bring out the best of their potentials,

To sharpen their awareness ... *(the men are becoming more irritated)*

Henceforth, women shall have equal rights of inheritance in matters of land and property! Today we have put a final seal on wife battering. A decree is hereby promulgated on wife battering." (152-153)

Essentially, these decrees challenge and contradict previous male autocracies, which have abetted female subjugation. A critical insight into the rules indicates that Onwueme has imbued her female king with gender-conscious principles. By giving Wazobia agency as

a king, by making her the central character and the admirable heroine, Onwueme breaks away from the dramatic style of male writers where central characters in positions of political leadership are perpetually designated as male.

However, numerous questions come to the foreground. Will men collaborate in strengthening Wazobia's vision of a unified Anioma? Is her vision too utopic, given that they jeer and boo at the mention of women being accorded the same rights as they have? The moment when Wazobia articulates her intention of empowering women becomes for me the most crucial point in the play, for the viewer anxiously waits for the events to unfold. The task that such an expectation places on the playwright is great, for she has to be aware of the potential of the work to take incredulous and contrived endings. Onwueme appears to be aware of this high demand. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the sudden transformation of Omu's hardline stance against Wazobia, to a staunch supporter of women rights.

Omu's transformation of heart is too sudden and undeveloped to be convincing when understood in its immediate context. After Man pursues his wife to the palace, he finds himself face to face with the powerful Wazobia who frustrates his desire to beat his wife by refusing to endorse such a brutal act. Powerless in this sense, he decides to bare his bottom to his wife to see, a traditional gesture that he has divorced her. Amidst cheers from the men, the Man stages a walk-out which gets the support of men and more so the chiefs. At this moment, Omu expresses her identification with the male crowd by following them. When Wazobia summons her back to the palace, Omu's initial attitude is that of belligerence: "Tell me what you have invited me for. Or have you called me

again to tell me how backward I am?" (154).

Wazobia's intention is not to harass or intimidate Omu for siding with the men. Instead, Onwueme presents her as being aware of the state of false consciousness that defines Omu. This is seen clearly in the polite questions she aims at Omu in hope that she will realize her shortsightedness:

> WAZOBIA: (*calmly*) Omu! Queen and mother of the tribe! First among women. Thumb without which fingers cannot snap... Look around you. For long men have had their baths with the tears of their daughters, Mother. For long their eyes have been covered to shield them from seeing, from knowing the truth. Look around you Omu! Women have ears. Why must they be prevented from hearing with them? Women have heads. Why must they be stuffed with wool only useful for cleaning up their men. Women have hands. Why must they not be allowed to use them fully to construct? (154)

After this challenge to her blindness in keeping the women divided in order to continue dominating them, Omu slowly relaxes and starts identifying with the ordinary women's cause. Her acceptance of Wazobia's logic is finalized when (*she spreads her hands, encompassing all the women who have risen in unison to form a circle around her*)"(155). What is most incredible about this development is to understand how three simple questions are strong enough to alter Omu's rigid stance. Omu's conversion, nevertheless, is an acceptable artistic choice. By presenting this expeditious conversion, Onwueme suggests that the preoccupation of African women should not be with

undermining others. Instead, they should realize how the pervasive male hegemony keep them divided against one another, while helping the men to continue to dominate.

Omu's conversion is also a dramatic counter-strategy that Onwueme employs to guard against the increasing male greed for power. Chief Idehen and Iyase are determined to frustrate and to overthrow any woman who ends up as the leader. To their chagrin, Wazobia outstays the three seasons' period that a regent-king is supposed to rule before she hands her throne permanently to a male. Idehen's consummate hatred and sexism towards Wazobia is projected every time he makes a reference to her. She is either a "mere woman" (155), "a woman", (155), or "the python that basks in the sun" (158). This hatred is best exemplified in the monologue where he tries to come to terms with female political power:

> IDEHEN: What use am I? A toy cap in the fingers of a mere woman.
>
> What use am I? A chief they call me who can stand on two feet and ten toes and allow a woman, a mere woman, to clear her rotten throat and split the phlegm at my face. As night overtakes day, we sit in complacency, while Wazobia wears the crown and stands between us. (155)

Since Idehen and Iyase plan are planning on how to fracture the solidarity showed by female characters in order to bring down Wazobia, Onwueme introduces Omu's solidarity with other female characters like Bia and Zo to counter their ambition. It is these two who report the chief's treason to Omu. Their willingness to end the men's schemes, their ability to organize themselves in order to contain the rebellion, shows the

ability of women to bond: "I know what we can do" says Zo. "Go brief Omu. Fetch her and other women here to the palace square while I go lock in Anehe and Wa that the plan of their plant may not take root. Time is of essence...Now is the time before sunrise. Go!" (165).

Contrary to how patriarchal values constructs the "cult of womanhood", where females are seen as powerless and passive, Zo and Bia are represented as capable women. Behind the phrase "while I lock in Anehe and Wa", lies a powerful voice of women that is determined to put down the enemies of women's advancement. By suggesting that they consult and bring all the women into the palace to prepare for the eventual confrontation, both women portray the necessity of solidarity among women. It is in this context that Omu's dramatic importance in *The Reign of Wazobia* gains significance. Due to her rallying call for the women to stand behind Wazobia, the attempt to overthrow Wazobia is held in abeyance. Like Bia and Zo's determination to express their solidarity, Omu's encouraging words need to be quoted. We see her being knowledgeable about dealing with rebellious men. Her suggestion on how to step up a practical strategy is successful and finally ends up humiliating the men, eventually forcing them to run away:

OMU: The palace is under threat. Men are poised to throw
Wazobia into the seas as sacrifice. To appease their ego, dethroned, for daring to smear their ego, for daring to tell you women have a right to exist...
That you have hands,

That you have heads,

That you have eyes,

That you have ears,

That you have feet,

Which men insist that you use occasionally, only for their own purpose.

CHORUS OF WOMEN: And we say no!

OMU: This is why you must stand behind Wazobia with your bosom,

your king, that men will not penetrate. At this very moment, men hold their meeting to unseat Wazobia.

Wazobia is us.

We are Wazobia.

Together we stand. What they plan is abominable, and we shall match force with force. Together, join hands. (166)

As the play ends, the female characters are able to match "male aggression" with "female aggression." As spectators we see the efforts of the male chiefs and their collaborators, to force the priests of Ani and Ohene to sabotage Wazobia's leadership, become hopelessly unsuccessful. Both priests refuse to endorse the traitors' plot, arguing that the gods have sanctioned her. Left with no alternative, the male chiefs resort to violence and aggression, an attempt which forces Omu to bring out her female army:

CHORUS OF MEN: Wazobia,

The will of the people

The people, Wazobia!

(WAZOBIA, *confused and frightened, looks for any friendly face, but she is alone. Suddenly the cock crows. Women from behind the throne sound their war cries. Led by the* OMU, *they advance, naked and in unison, form an arc behind* WAZOBIA. *The men are so shocked that they retreat, stagger and freeze in their stupefaction. Total silence. From behind, someone pushes* WA *and* ANEHE *forward to the front of* IYASE *and* IDEHEN *and the men carrying the pot of herbs and the calabash. OMU looks with fiery eyes at them*). 173

In a patriarchal dramatic ending, we would expect that all the traitors would be annihilated, since this guarantees the hegemony of the dominant ideologies. While Omu contemplates forcing the rebels to take their own prescription, a violent act that can be metaphorically associated with male leadership, Wazobia prefers to solve the problem differently. Her preference for peaceful co-existence portrays her as being capable of avoiding self-defeatist strategies that are often adapted by oppressed people.

Wazobia's call for peace within her group of women should not be construed as a mark of weakness. Through violence, she can possibly annihilate her enemies, but since her women have discovered that the most lethal weapon is their ability to bond together, such an action becomes unnecessary. As long as they identify with each other, and act together, female characters can easily start removing the fetters that men have placed on them. Confident that the men's efforts have been harnessed, the female characters shout a jubilant cry of victory, "Long Reign Wazobia". We may question the future prospects of Wazobia's reign after such a difficult moment of opposition. My response to such a

concern is simple. Whether Wazobia rules for a long or not is beside the point. The most important thing is that further efforts to oppress women may not succeed with women starting to gain self-consciousness. Such awareness is what makes them realize that all of them are Wazobia, and Wazobia is all of them: a discovery that reveals the importance of bonding among dominated people. Their chant of "Long Reign Wazobia!" becomes more than wishing one individual to continue exercising power. Instead, it transcends individualism, and marks every female member of Anioma kingdom as a Wazobia who must exercise self-agency.

Thus, in *The Reign of Wazobia*, Onwueme is able to present her readers with a hierarchical society where men have vested interests in controlling the circulation of power. The hierarchical society, argues Onwueme, leads to competition, greed, and self-serving machinations. Placing women in positions of power under such social systems does not essentially alter the power relations, for ultimately there will be men who still covet the top positions. Under such a context, Onwueme suggests various strategies that could change the inequitable power relations. First, she privileges the necessity of making the dominated class aware of its oppression as seen through the dramatic functions of Wazobia and Omu in particular. Through these characters, Onwueme emphasizes the need for women to be wary of their social-cultural positions and of whether those positions reduce them to object status. Second, she uses them as mouthpieces to express the notion of female assertiveness. It is only when the female characters begin to assert themselves that they are able to counter male exclusionary practices.

CHAPTER THREE

Tell it to Women

Fe-mi-ni-sm! That is the newest meal for malnourished African
(Onwueme, 1997)

In *Tell it to Women*, the last play to be analyzed, I continue to look for resistant female voices within African hierarchical social structures. Like *The Reign of Wazobia*, *Tell it to Women* interrogates the marginalization of the women within a post-colonial African context. I analyze how its focus on the interplay of class, sex, and gender opens the dialectic between Western-educated middle-class women represented by Ruth and Daisy, and the rural women as represented by Adaku, Yemoja, Sherifat, and other numerous rural women. I suggest that the opening of the dialectic leads to the entry of different discourses and counter-discourses on "feminisms" as they affect the experiences of African women.

To this end, I employ a range of feminist theories, namely: liberal, radical, and materialist feminist theories in order to show how Onwueme has used certain characters as mouthpieces for each of these theories. Through Ruth and Daisy, the two Western-educated women, she introduces the Western liberal and radical theories as a way of opening the dialectic with a broader base of historical material conditions. I argue that the competitiveness of liberal and radical theories begins to create its own counter-discourses which in turn attempt to explain how various forms of oppression intersect. Finally, materialist feminist theory is employed because it incorporates both liberal and radical feminist theories, speaks to all women regardless of their social status, and situates the oppression of women in the historical and social conditions that affect the

lives of women.

This chapter looks at the strategies that Onwueme initially uses to set up various discourses so that counter-discourses may emerge. My position is that Onwueme is being deliberate, for in setting the dialectic, she is able to privilege the multiplicity of voices that arise without necessarily saying that one category of women has all the solutions to women's oppression. I will therefore show how various discourses are set and how they clash, triggering counter-discourses, which eventually build up to a final climactic moment when the rural women reject the middle-class women's foreign ideas and substitute them with their local ones.

Tell it to Women was first published in 1992, and is set in a post-colonial Kingdom of Idu in Africa. In the play, Onwueme provides her spectators with a cast made up almost entirely of female characters who are differentiated in terms of age, education, class, sexual orientation, and dramatic function. Through these five factors, Onwueme makes an ambitious attempt to examine female subjugation in late twentieth century-Africa, whose social, political and economic structures are becoming increasingly more modernized by technology. In the process, she permits the spectators to behold the female politics of empowerment in an emerging capitalist society such as Idu Kingdom. Besides introducing feminist politics, Onwueme also expresses distaste at the indiscriminate appropriation of Western theorems and values that are incongruent with African values. Consequently, this position opens up an almost unresolved discourse underlying the African-Western paradigm. By looking at the unresolved discourses, I seek a better understanding of how Onwueme aims at setting and

problematizing gender politics in African drama as they relate to various theories of Western and African feminism.

A brief outline of the major female characters will delineate the various categories of women involved, and explain how these categories help to generate the conflict in the play. Since age gives the characters different statuses in the society, Onwueme presents her spectators with a continuum of characters whose age spread from the seventy-one-year-old Adaku to the ten-year-old Bose. All the middle-aged women, with the exception of Yemoja, live in the urban settlements, and speak foreign languages in their ordinary conversations, while the post-middle-aged rural women use the vernacular to communicate with other another. When education is placed alongside age, it emerges that the middle-aged women have received it, while the older generation has not. Onwueme uses the coupling of age, education, and class to define her characters as either Western-educated middle-class or non-educated, Ibo women. Such a delineation becomes vital when Onwueme sets up the various discourses and counter-discourses.

A critical look at the presentation of Daisy, Ruth, and Her Excellency reveals something distinct about their names. In the play's cast of the three males and ten female characters, it is only their Western names that have no African resonance behind them. Onwueme prefers to name other characters using African signifiers such as Okei, Yemoja, Ajie, Ajaka, Bose, Adaku, or Tolue. Through their names, Onwueme is able to ground the conflict of cultural identity, which is one of the main conflicts between the middle-class and rural-women. It would be simplistic, if superficially true, to argue that since they have received western education, African names no longer appeal to them. By

discarding their own indigenous names, and adopting others from an entirely new culture, Ruth and Daisy show the extent to which their minds have become colonized. The orientation towards identifying with a colonial Christian name is a dream that has been associated with an apologetic African middle-class eagerly seeking identification and acceptance by the Western bourgeoisie (Fanon, 153-154).

Frantz Fanon's reference to the middle class's desire to imitate Western bourgeoisie reflects the desire by the Western-educated middle-class women in the play to follow Western ideologies. For instance, in the name 'Daisy', the spectator is confronted by a name that symbolizes the Western exotic charm and beauty captured in a "daisy" flower. In line with Fanon's proposition, this may explain why her inclination is to move towards Western values and doctrines as the panacea for the problems faced by the rural women. Most ridiculous is Onwueme's reference to the wife of the president by only the designated title of "Her Excellency". Unlike Ruth or Daisy who can claim to be Western-educated, Her Excellency is illiterate, which highlights Onwueme's ability to ridicule the Western oriented middle-class. Through Her Excellency's title, Onwueme could be suggesting that the only excellent thing about the middle-class is its undying desire to be distinct from the ordinary people either through the acquisition of high-sounding names or the appropriation of exotic ones.

Ruth's name, on the other hand, carries a heavy Biblical connotation, given that one of the books of the Old Testament goes by that name. Echoes of the Biblical Ruth's loyalty to Naomi, her dead husband's mother sharply contrast with the general personality of Onwueme's self-centred Ruth. The name reminds one of Other than

ringing bells on the effect of Christianity and how the religion encourages the adoption of Western names, there is little to relate between Ruth and Christianity per se. She is identified as 'a feminist scholar' whose intimate attachment to Daisy labels her a lesbian. The identification of Ruth as lesbian opens another discourse in African's traditional understanding of sex. To what extent will all the characters depicted in the play accept her sexual orientation? Like Daisy's exotic name, her sexual orientation opens up a new discourse that enunciates individual rights, a discourse that is resisted when the rural women refuse to buy the idea of any individual who is distanced from the collective voice of all the women.

In contrast to Daisy, Ruth and Her Excellency, who represent the normally Western-educated middle-class, Yemoja has received some Western education but could not complete college because of lack of money. Like the rest of the Ibo characters, Yemoja bears a symbolic name, which stands for Onokwu or the Goddess of the Sea and Child of wealth (22). Onwueme's reason for making her both rural and semi-educated is easy to understand. By situating her in a neither/nor position or what Homi Bhabha calls "third space" (207-227), Onwueme is able to present both the working-class and middle-classes' discourses through a person who understands both of them. On the structural level in the play, Yemoja becomes crucial in embodying the conflict between modern and liberated women represented by Ruth and Daisy, and the rural represented by all the Daughters of Umuada.

By applying Ogundipe-Leslie's theory of myths, I will show how the play representation of female subjugation can be understood in terms of "othering", a process

through which a supposedly superior group of people believes that it understands more than those whom it perceives to be superior to. In what she has theorized as the possible manner in which oppression of rural women is perpetuated, Ogundipe-Leslie identifies six myths. These are the myths of: the "traditional" woman, the uncreative rural woman, the linear development from rural bondage, the submissive "traditional" woman, the "traditional" woman wanting to remain "traditional", and the myth of marriage in rural life (48-54). I will confine myself only to three of these myths which relate directly to female politics as presented by Onwueme. I will look at the myths of: the "traditional woman wanting to remain traditional, African marriages within rural life, and the submissive "traditional" woman where "traditional" in this context is used to refer to woman who is retrogressive and unwilling to adopt new changes.

According to Ogundipe-Leslie, the trope of the "traditional" woman has been used in African creative works to negate her capacity to integrate change and imported ideas into her adult consciousness. Most often, it has become a justifiable indicator that African rural women desire to remain "traditional". This myth constructs a cult of femininity where the female is conceived as a subordinate, unquestionably loyal, pious, docile and passive. Consequently, the cult of true femininity becomes a convenient weapon wielded by hegemonic structures in Africa in order to continue consigning women to economic, political or educational edges. Ogundipe-Leslie's protests against the myth of the "traditional" woman are informed by what she sees as the deliberate attempt to deny women any sense of subjectivity. Though she identifies most of the grey areas associated with women's oppression, she falls into an ambivalent silence about the

writings by selected number of African female writers whose depiction of rural female characters is presented in the same way as male writers. Despite her silence, Ogundipe-Leslie's myths should be read as vehement protestations. Through them, she sets forth a counter-discourse whose aim is to correct the skewed representation of female characters as victims who are unable to create their own agency. It is in this context that the play's opening movement will be analyzed.

Onwueme opens Movement One by giving it the title of, "Fatal Attraction-The Village Belle in Love with the Beautiful Monster"(16). Through the title she is able to capture the dialectic nature of the events that are about to unfold. In this Movement, we are presented with two classes of women currently living in the city. As the title suggests, there is a premonition through the belle-monster metaphor that the relationships between the characters will not be of mutual support. Echoes of the proverbial monster in African folktale who as a handsome man woos the village belle in a beauty contest only to try and kill her in his hut come to mind. When we first see her, Yemoja is sleeping on the kitchen floor in Daisy's "[...room] lavishly decorated with all kinds of artefacts imported form overseas" (15). Her presence in the city has been at the request of both Ruth and Daisy, who after travelling to the rural village to spearhead a campaign. Yemoja's choice was on virtue of her ability to read, write and understand "Oyibo"--which is the rural women's way of referring to English.

Ruth and Daisy believe that Yemoja deserves humiliating treatment because of her rural background. This takes us back to Ogundipe-Leslie's myth about the false notion that the "traditional" woman wants to remain "traditional". Based on this

rhetoric, it is not surprising that Ruth and Daisy would interpret Yemoja's journey to the city as a symbolic journey from "rural primitivism" to the world of "civilization". Through Yemoja's humiliation experience, Onwueme suggests that in a capitalist society, women's competition for their share of power usually end up favouring men because men control the power structures. In the process of the competition, women alienate each other because they are envious that the little power they have may be wrestled away from them. At the same time, the power structures operate in such a way that women's preoccupation with power struggle, among themselves will prevent them from challenging their domination by men who control these structures.

These incidences of Yemoja's humiliation by the "monsters" help to foreground the predisposition of the Western-educated women towards rural women in the play. As spectators, we see how Onwueme represents the divisive power inherent in an emerging capitalist society like Idu. Classism, a sense of superiority based on one's social status, is what Daisy and Ruth exhibit to their supposedly inferior others. It prevents them from identifying with the rural women, especially Yemoja, and when they do it, it is a hypocritical move bent on using the relationship to serve their own interests. Rather than proselytize that sexual politics alone perpetuate the marginalization of the African women, Movement One demonstrates that it is the interplay of class, sex, and gender relations in specific historical circumstances that have led to the subjugation of the African women. In this Movement, Yemoja becomes an example of what hierarchical systems do to the rural women when middle-class women start jostling for positions of power and wealth accumulation. Through her, Onwueme shows the middle class women

falling into the very trap of turning against the lower class women by seeing them as potential spoilers, who might hold the middle-class women in the competition game of capitalist politics.

In Movement Two, Onwueme sets forth a multiplicity of discourses, more so when specific rural characters engage in an ordinary dialogue only to have its content used later as a counter-discourse. Taking the form of a flashback, Movement Two returns to the village during the occasion when Yemoja was selected as the representative of the rural women. In this regard, it is not a linear development of Movement One, but a non-linear strategy that Onwueme uses to define her play as breaking from the mainstream representation. In this Movement, Onwueme seeks to subvert the stereotyped belief that rural working-class women are content to remain on the margins of development discourse. She presents two female characters, Ruth and Daisy, whom she labels as "modern educated women" (25-26). Their function is twofold. As emissaries of the government, they have come to the village to initiate the "development" plans that the government has for the villagers. At the symbolic level they represent a discourse that is typified by their attachment to Western values. Thus, based on these functions, we are as spectators, presented with a potential conflict given that we have already seen their nature in Movement One where they have humiliated one of the rural women.

Before they arrive in the village arena, Onwueme has the rural female characters engage in "small talk" through which selected politics of radical and liberal feminist theories are exposed and interrogated. In the gossip between Sherifat and Adaku, the

two eldest women in the play, a critical view of nationalistic and feminist polemics seems to be the underlying text Onwueme wants to expose to her spectators. In their gossip, both blame the aggressive western forces, especially those concerned with the Second World War for taking away their sons. Not only is colonialism revealed as having taken away lands and source of livelihood but is also blamed for causing disintegration of families. While reminiscing about the horrors, pain, and disintegration brought about by the war, Adaku highlights the centrality of children in the Ibo ethos. By giving prominence to the value that Ibo attach to a "girl-child", Onwueme enables her female characters to pre-empt any debate that may allude that the value of the girl-child in Ibo community has always been only sexual in nature.

We may wonder why Onwueme presents Adaku and Sherifat as valorizing the value of the girl-child. Literally, it may be that the two old women are excited that two of their daughters, like their sons, have succeeded in life, and that they are the ones bringing good news of what the government intends to do. At metaphorical level, Onwueme is using Adaku and Sherifat to counter 'foreign experts" who claim to know more about the people than the people know about themselves. Within such an interpretation, both women's privileging of the girl-child becomes understandable, as the following conversation illustrates:

SHERIFAT: (*Interrupting)*

> But the female child is more valuable. That I can defend anytime. Look at me in my old age. It's my daughters who know that I need fish, crayfish, firewood and soap for me to wash my clothes now.

ADAKU: Are you telling me? "Nwanyi-bu-ife". The female child is truly something of treasure. Look at me now! Five male children! They throw plenty of money at me, as if money will answer my call. When I was younger I was filled with pride that I had so many sons. Why is that now?... That is why you people with daughters don't know what your god has done for you. "Adu-aza-oku": wealth cannot answer the rich man's call no matter how much of it he has. That is why we value children more than anything else in our own world: they have ruined the world. Modern ways come with this thing - money, money, money. (24)

Adaku's position in this dialogue is simple. In her Ibo community, the female child carries a lot of personal value. Through Adaku, who undoubtedly seems to take the playwright's voice, Onwueme stresses her focal point about the nature of the community that is awaiting Ruth and Daisy. It is a community that is deeply attached to the female child and children in general, and one that is facing disintegration due to the effects that capitalism has brought.

Such is the community that Ruth and Daisy are supposed to come and sell the government's official rhetoric of women's development, as well as their own of true feminism. True to Adaku's lament about class materialism, the duo's arrival in the village has all the trapping of a male-centric materialistic society. Their arrival in convoys of expensive limousines is not different from the extravagant appearances made by other members of upper echelons in many Third World countries. It is an arrival that is marked by all the signifiers of a contented upper middle-class parading

themselves in front of a dazzled and unsatisfied rural. Since their exhibition of power and class is effectively contrasted with Adaku's social status as Ada, I will use the set-up in order to show how Onwueme prepares her spectators for the discourses that arise soon after Ruth and Daisy give their speeches to the women. It is Adaku who has the honor of drawing the attention of the rural women to the arrival of the two

> ADAKU: Our daughters are here. (*Everyone turns in this new direction. Two ultra-modern women walk majestically toward the crowd. They move with great confidence. They wear enough lipstick to paint a room. Their clothes look very expensive. The two male guards leading them to the gathering bow and hand over some files to each of them . . . it is obvious that the men are taking instructions from them (26).*

After they take their position on the "*two special executive seats on the platform*", Adaku's place among the Idu daughters is also highlighted:

> *Adaku takes up her position at the center as "Ada" of the clan. The "Ada" is a very important position of power, authority and respect among men and women. As the oldest daughter of the clan, she is "first amongst equals," the Umuada or the daughters of the clan. The Umuada are very powerful; they wield so much influence in the community that sons and other men of Idu can never rival or disrespect them. (26)*

The depiction of these two classes of women makes a clear distinction on how both sides exercise power. While Adaku's special status is rooted in the cultural significance

attached to the position of the Ada, that of Ruth and Daisy is derived from their acquisition of Western values. By portraying the two classes of women as represented by leaders who derive their authority and respect from divergent aspects, Onwueme is able to foreground two discourses that critical spectators should expect from these two leaders.

In her welcoming address to the assembly as the Ada, Adaku praises the personal successes of the "ultra-modern guests from the city" (28), and lets everyone know how generally kind the women have become. "At last our daughters have become our mouthpieces to the 'Gomenti'. Isn't there a saying amongst us in Idu that "If you begin to eat, you also give your sister and brother their share?"(28), a remark that draws thunderous cry of approval from the women. For her and the rest of the women, this great occasion is a moment of "aba-wu-tu" (about) and foreshadows great fortunes to come. Evidently, two of their own daughters of Idu have come back as true achievers. Adaku's humorous remark that "women like us drive long shiny cars, splashing mud and water on us as we beat the earth with our receding feet" (28) is an indicator of the earnest desire by all women to live comfortable and fulfilling lives. As the 'centre' of the Umuada or daughters of Idu, she talks of the past mountains that they have endured. From her bitterness, it is obvious that neither she nor her clan are content with the burdens of poverty that "traditionalism" has heaped on the women. Seeing Ruth and Daisy make it to the corridors of political power, or succeed in educational excellence motivates the feeling that the time has come for women's empowerment.

Adaku's welcoming speech fulfils a very important dramatic purpose. Through it, Onwueme marks her departure from mainstream African playwrights by giving her

rural characters a chance to voice the kind of life they would like to live. With the exception of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Sembene Ousmane, most leading African playwrights rarely let their female characters have a vision which transcends stereotypes. Onwueme's *Tell it to Women* is therefore unique, for it represents the female protagonists articulating their needs and wants through the character o Adaku:

> ADAKU: *Our daughters know that we like to ride in long cars and fly like birds in the sky. Our daughters know that we long for clean water, that we too want to stand in kitchen and turn metals to produce water to run into our bowels like the sky god pouring instant blessings into our bowl of life (28).*

Through this articulation, Onwueme presents rural women in a significant stage of self-awareness. It is a stage that challenges the myth of the "traditional" woman wanting to remain unaffected by modern changes. She advocates giving agency to voiceless women, but at the same time resists speaking on their behalf. By giving her rural characters a voice to express their needs, she succeeds in portraying their needs as pertinent in an actual historic and present-day situation.

While it is evident that the intended audience of Adaku's address is the whole assembly that is gathered, Ruth's and Daisy's address sounds like an introductory course to feminist theory, a fact which makes their intention to talk with the women very patronizing. The duo are too Westernized, detached, and entrenched in class and power politics to understand the basic wants of the rural women as the following excerpts show:

> RUTH: (*Addressing the women of Idu*) Idu!

CHORUS OF WOMEN: Eeih!

RUTH: I come to you as a pathfinder to show you the markers and centers from which women have been mystified, ostracized and marginalized for centuries.

CHORUS OF WOMEN: *(In admiration)* Eeih!

RUTH: (*Now more empowered by their approval)* We are the torchbearers of global sisterhood. Our mission is to break boundaries of confinement and compartmentalisation of our potentialities in the oppressive, despotic and tyrannical hegemony of patriarchy imposed on us these many years . . . (30)

Represented satirically by the playwright, Ruth only corroborates the fact that she is above the rural women. For her, education, and power become the end rather than a means of locating herself within the society. She comes out a feminist scholar who has embraced the theory's big words, which she carelessly uses, whether she is understood or not. This negates the purpose for her message, for if none of the rural women can comprehend what she is saying, it means that she is content to talk at the women rather than talk with them, as Adaku does. Onwueme's satirical pinch becomes more effective when Ruth interprets the perplexed voices of women as urging her on with her convoluted speech. By employing this kind of academic language to address ordinary women as if they were an undergraduate class in a Women's Studies course, Ruth misses the most basic tenet of communication- the awareness of one's audience. Instead, she ends up inviting resentment and confusion, though it has one blind follower in the name of Sherifat. In what later grows to be a conflict between the two classes, Adaku makes it clear to Ruth as well as the women she represents that theoretical

she represents that theoretical speeches mean little to women who barely understand "ingrisi". In presenting Adaku's denunciation of Ruth's empty rhetoric, Onwueme is able to highlight the ability of the rural women to determine who should speak for and about women.

The ability to determine who should speak for and about women leads to an ambivalent attitude towards the global sisterhood that Ruth has tried to embellish. For instance, despite the claim that Ruth and Daisy are the torchbearers of global sisterhood, they are ineffective in proving how they are going to bring it about. Their first attempts to address the women alienates rather than creates bonds, because they have become more "white", and their "whiteness" finds itself incompatible with the "lowliness" of the rural women.

The failure of global sisterhood and other feminist criticisms to articulate clearly their super-objectives has been criticized by many feminist scholars, especially African, and African-American feminist scholars. For instance, hooks argues that women are enriched when they bond with one another. However, she cautions that "no sustainable ties or political solidarity can develop using the model of Sisterhood generated by bourgeois women liberationists" (45), which is what Ruth and Daisy are. What therefore emerges from the skeptical treatment that Ruth's global sisterhood receive, is a well-calculated arm-length attitude towards veiled dogmas. Even though Onwueme does not dismiss global sisterhood outright, there is reluctance on her part to admit that it will work practically in Idu. Instead, she satirizes the defenders of global sisterhood by making them seek collective bonding, while representing them as too snobbish and entrenched in their own world of material success.

In satirizing the defenders of global sisterhood, Onwueme presents a counter-discourse to their attempt to impose Western sexual politics on everyone. Through Adaku again, Onwueme suggests what "helpful" women should have in mind when they think of assisting the rural women, a discourse that runs parallel to that espoused by Ruth and Daisy. What is uppermost in this play is that social and historical realities of African women ought to be examined, and grounded within an African context. However, I would argue that Onwueme is not dismissing Western feminism *per se*. Neither is she stating that it has nothing to offer the edification of African women. Instead; she is against the aggressive privileging of extreme radical and liberal "feminisms" as the only ones that can offer legitimate remedies. One of the finest examples that best captures such extremism is an excerpt by Ruth, who does not hesitate to speak in obscure terms to her audience: "The watch word for contemporary woman is EQUALITY. Time has come for redressing the female on the paradigmatic scale of being in equality with her male counterpart" (Playwright's emphasis, 34).

Since Ruth and Daisy's gender politics are directed towards both Western liberal and radical feminism, an expected conflict arises when their ideas are imposed on women operating under an African social-cultural context. Most African gender scholars agree that Western radical feminism does not fit within the context of African values. Instead, they argue that in an African context, feminism is neither about adversarial gender politics nor the reversal of gender roles. (Davies and Graves, 8-11: Ogundipe-Leslie, 219-222:Nfah-Abbenyi, 149-150). Due to their indiscriminate appropriation of liberal and radical feminism, Ruth and Daisy can only view rural women as an oppressed and a victimized marginal group. Such a viewpoint leads them

to believe that they are more powerful as seen in Ruth's self-righteous speech about the fortunes of Western radical feminism:

> RUTH: ...The feminist discourse is concerned with reinscribing and reconstructing the place of woman from the viewpoints of the opposites. Women are to be centred against the background and parameters in logocentric and pedagogical terms, centres long appropriated by men...(35)

Unfortunately, not even the rural women are willing to buy a 'strange model' to solve their problems. Led by Adaku, Idu women challenge the Western theory of equality for women, pointing out that they have always had their own powers while men have had theirs. For them, gender differences should be complementary rather than oppositional, and not viewed as tensions of antagonisms, but mutuality. (35-37). By resisting the new packaged form of Western emancipation, Adaku not only deconstructs the Western discourse of the powerless and voiceless woman, but goes ahead to show how resistant others will be when their power is challenged.

As spectators, we may wonder why the two elderly women play a very central role during the assembly. The answer lies with the dramatic function Onwueme ascribes to each of them. While Sherifat thinks that the new "Oyibo" or English speaking women are the hopes of Idu women, Adaku undercuts her argument by quoting the significance of some Idu cultural values which Ruth and Daisy view as retrogressive. For instance, on the issue of motherhood, which both have condemned as oppressive, Adaku has a very strong counter-discourse that clarifies its centrality as an issue among Idu community members, and by implication most of Africa's women:

ADAKU: For me motherhood is the ultimate power, and I don't know any man yet born of a woman who can boast of the power to conceive... I mean create and carry another life. In Idu men are outsiders in the process of giving birth? (Pause.) Only women have such access and power to be part of the communal team to bring the child to life on behalf of the community. Even when the husband is around, he stays out and is only told after the baby is born. (37)

Through Adaku's voice, Onwueme asserts the discourse of the positive value of motherhood within an African context, in contrast to the radical feminists' position on the oppressive nature of motherhood. Adaku's perception of motherhood as empowering rather than oppressive contradicts numerous expositions that have been written by feminists opposed to motherhood. A good example is Jeffner Allen. Allen urges women to "evacuate" motherhood by not focusing on the power *to have* children but rather on the power *not to have* children:

> At present, and for a thousand years past, women have conceived, borne, and raised multitudes of children without any change in the conditions of lives as women. In the case that all women were to decide not to have children for the next twenty years, the possibilities for developing new modes of thought be would almost unimaginable. (99-100)

Even from a Western perspective, Allen's idea of motherhood's annihilation is both exciting and disconcerting. From a short-term perspective, it offers a ray of hope to all those women who may want to pursue a life of independence and choice. On the other

hand, it does little to guarantee that after abandoning motherhood, women will emerge empowered, an observation that Adrienne Rich makes in *Of Woman Born*.

While conceding that biological motherhood could be oppressive, Rich goes beyond biological determinism and postulates two ways of understanding motherhood. For her, motherhood has a dual nature. It can be understood as an "experience" and an "institution" at the same time; "[it is] the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to the children" and "the *institution* which aims at ensuring that the potential- and all women- shall remain under male control"(13). Her distinction, between motherhood as an experience, and motherhood as an institution created by patriarchy, is a very valuable one. Within the context of *Tell it to Women* and African feminist discourse, her assertion that female biology is not necessarily limiting finds a lot of credibility. This is similar to what Adaku maintains all along, that motherhood has never been limiting to Idu women, but has been a source of power and authority:

> ADAKU: Even when the husband is not around, he stays out and is only told after the baby is born. And that is because women believe that men are weak as far as this delicate process is concerned and therefore they must leave them out. While men exhibit their chivalry in the battlefield, women exhibit their own chivalry in their homes. (37)

Thus it can be argued that Rich's proposition strikes a chord from an African perspective of what motherhood is.

Another radical feminist whose position is worth looking at is America's Shulamith Firestone. Firestone is extreme in her attitude towards motherhood. Arguing

that patriarchy is rooted in the biological inequality of the sexes, she as many others have done before, revises feminist materialist theory which argues that women's oppression is rooted in the historic forces of class struggle. According to her and others, it is 'sex class' rather than the 'economic class' that is the central force behind women's oppression. The fact that women reproduce, rather than produce makes it possible for capitalism to confine them to the domestic and private spheres, while sending men out to labor in the public realm. If technology could eliminate the role of woman-the-producer, she argues, it could also eliminate that of man-the-producer (242). In a summative way, Firestone's theories are emphatic that since the roots of women's oppression are biological, women's liberation and empowerment would require a biological revolution, in much the same way Karl Marx's oppressed working-class required an economic revolution to overthrow their oppressors.

Though Firestone is right in observing that men have tended to claim women's sexuality and bodies to serve their own interests, as in the case of Courtuma in *The Broken Calabash,* her dismissal of motherhood would be difficult to integrate into an African feminist context. Contrary to what she articulates, the oppression of women does not lie in female biology but in man's control of it, which in turn limits the potential of women to exercise their voices. Furthermore, in a continent that has been subjected to such destructive Western practices such as slavery, colonialism, and imperialism, any claim that restricts women's oppression to motherhood is limited. Firestone's claim that biological reproduction is neither in the best interests of women, nor of the children reproduced, that the joy of giving birth is a "patriarchy myth", that pregnancy is "barbaric" (12), makes sense in a capitalist system. To take the same

model and impose it on emerging capitalist societies in Africa is not enough to empower the rural women. Unless the multiple sources of oppression, such as the effects of the imposition of such ideas, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and imperialism are interrogated, any talk of women's empowerment fall short of fruition.

No matter how hard they try to sell their foreign ideas about women's oppression, this is the reality that Ruth and Daisy have to contend with, a reality of effecting their ideas within an African context. Such a change requires that they let go of their prejudiced notions about the rural women as "victims" who can only be successful in life if they welcome imported solutions. Onwueme represents the rural women already acting "aggressively," an indication that they are claiming their productive powers when the men think that it is prudent to interrupt their affairs. A look at what happens when Koko, Yemoja's husband, leads a group of disgruntled men to the arena is a good pointer as to why Ruth and Daisy's advice to the rural women is unworkable.

When the rural women gather together, one earlier piece of advice that is offered by Ruth is that they should do away with men (48) if they want to progress. Naturally, such advice is seen to be discordant with the women's interpretation of their lives. A critical reading of the play makes one wonder the reason why the women would reject such advice given that men are responsible partially for their state of powerlessness. However, we need to consider Onwueme's rural women's characters in their cultural context. African women are neither looking for war between the sexes, which is close to what Ruth is advocating, nor are they eager to promote division within the kingdom. Instead, they are interested in knowing how to effect positive changes in their kingdom

without necessarily ostracising any segment of the community. A look at how they deal with men like Koko and Okeke, who interfere with their affairs, helps to illustrate their readiness for peaceful change.

When Koko storms into the arena "followed by the protesting men whose voices have long since been heard in the background" (51), his intention is to stop *his* wife Yemoja, from associating with the rest of the women. His claim that he has come to fetch his wife from "the madness of these drunk women" (51) is not only plainly chauvinistic, but is an indication of his disrespect towards the daughters of Umuada. Just because Yemoja is a woman, and his wife, means that she cannot be expected to decide for herself whether she should represent the Umuada daughters in the city without his personal approval. Underlying Koko's patronising attitude towards his wife is the archetypal notion of the submissive woman who must be controlled for her own good. Onwueme refuses to make her heroine play the role of the submissive female, disrupting the myth of the traditional submissive woman, a myth against which Ogundipe-Leslie strongly argues (51).

Koko's mentality of docile rural woman collapses when the rural women stop him in his tracks through taunting, jeering and ridicule:

> KOKO: What has become of you women? You are certainly beginning to overreach yourselves. Or may be you are drunk? (Pause). But it is not for me to take you. That will be left for the elders . . . I am only here to take my wife.
>
> SHERIFAT: *(Acting like a reporter)* Has anyone here taken Koko's wife?
>
> CHORUS OF WOMEN: No!

ADAKU: (*Mockingly)* Brother is your wife missing? Sisters! My brother's heart is on fire. His wife is missing. Has anyone seen my brother's wife?

SHERIFAT: Brother you heard the women. No woman here has taken your wife. (*Turning around again to the women).* Or did any woman take Koko's wife?

CHORUS OF WOMEN: No!!! The gods forbid it !!!

ADAKU: Brother. If I were in your position, I would pack my things together and find my way home (54).

Subjected to this sort of unexpected ridicule, Koko's mantle of chauvinism starts slowly to disintegrate and he is forced to leave the arena an embarrassed and defeated male.

It is not the first time in Onwueme's plays that men have tried to control women's efforts to protect their own social and material conditions. Courtuma in *The Broken Calabash,* and chiefs Iyase and Idehen in *The Reign of Wazobia,* are good examples of such men. Koko's forceful entry into the women's assembly should be seen as an attempt by intransigent African men eager to take over the space that the rural women have carved for themselves. However, Onwueme denies these male characters a chance to claim victory. Instead, she ensures that they are made aware that it is futile to try to interfere with the women's attempt to join together. Yemoja's refusal to acquiesce to the threats of her husband, and her father-in-law in particular, shows her personal understanding of the value of agency. Her actions affirm Ogundipe-Leslie's position that the rural women should not be thought of as uncritical acquiescent beings.

The refusal to be passive is also presented through Adaku, who makes an assertive statement that is specifically meant for the "intruders". Warning them that they should not delude themselves that rural women are weaklings, Adaku speaks on behalf of the women's "rebellious" spirit that greets intrusive Koko and his father: "We, Umuada, are the head of the land. We Umuada are the fingers that look frail but on the day of the battle the spark of fire. We are the Umuada daughters of land ...Umuada, do I speak your voice?" (54). The men do not think that Umuada's voice is worth listening to, and that is why they initially try to use the language of force and intimidation. This is the language that the booing men have been used to; the language that the arrogant Koko tries with Yemoja but fails to threaten her. What is ironic about the male characters and this type of language is the way Onwueme portrays in rapid successions the failure of male characters who come to confront the women in the arena.

A look at Okeke's confrontation helps to illustrate this irony. Okeke, Yemoja's father, is represented by Onwueme as a ridiculous male who resorts to the same unsuccessful discourse that his son has used, in the hope that he will make the women, and especially Yemoja, follows the men's advice. His attempt to intimidate his daughter, soon after that of his son-in-law reveals his egocentricity. His demand that Yemoja renounce the women's project and instead follow him (61) is expected to fail, given that his son has also tried to assert his own will without any success. In this futile attempt, Onwueme shows her spectators how the widespread patriarchal claim over the ownership and control of female bodies is being challenged by resolute female characters. In her preference for the "daughters of Umuada", rather than the closest

men in her life, Yemoja disrupts patriarchal hegemony by challenging male control and claim over the female body and sexuality.

> YEMOJA: *(Finally breaking her silence.)* What has become so important now that I am your daughter? Was I not also your daughter when you chose not to send me to the university? And preferred instead to educate my brother? . . . Did you not hurry me into marriage to be able to educate my brother? *(Silence. Between the silences Yemoja turns to Koko.)* And you, what have you done with me? Am I not your NOTHING? Am I not your lag for wiping your hands and feet? . . . Why must I first be your wife before I am myself? Why can't I be me? Eh Koko, answer me? (*Silence reigns.)* Does anyone ever think of me? Me as me. Why must a female always be someone else's wife and daughter and mother before she can gain recognition in the eyes of the world? . . . let me be ME! Idu, I too have a voice! Hear me too!!" (62)

This speech summarises the personal experiences of rural African women when pitted against patriarchy. Yemoja criticises the trafficking in the female body, and resents the preferential treatment of males. The ills afflicting the rural women are shown here as incapable of being compartmentalised into oppositional binaries, but as having to be understood, analyzed, and engaged from a multiple perspective of sex, gender, and class issues. It would be simplistic for instance to assume that sexism is solely responsible for the marginalization of women, just because Koko and his father want to impose their wills on Yemoja. In the play, Onwueme contrasts Koko's and his father's gender insensitivity with Okei's (Daisy's husband) objectivity. Her representation of Okei

invites a number of pertinent questions that need to be addressed, given his middle-class status in Idu.

Okei is introduced to the spectators in the list of characters, and is said to be Secretary to the Government where his wife Daisy is Director of Women's Affairs. The two therefore hold very high profile positions in the government. However, when he starts critiquing as suspicious his wife's motivation behind the rural women campaign the spectators are compelled to start viewing her and Ruth as over-ambitious and only interested in enhancing their own positions. Unlike Koko, who views his wife's agency as a threat to his authority, Okei is never worried about Daisy's agency or autonomy. Onwueme presents him as one who in principle appreciates the women's cause. However, he is annoyed that Ruth's and Daisy's philosophies are out of place with the material needs of the rural women whom they want to empower. Okei is given the opportunity of the male "outsider" to point out what is essentially wrong with the female middle-class approach to the plight of rural women.

> OKEI: Ugh! Fe-mi-ni-sm! That is the newest meal for malnourished Africans. Yeah! Dish it out! Let's get bloated on it. If you don't know yourselves, maybe you should let others tell it you women what you really are. Someone should tell you that people are getting tired of your feminist garbage. Anyone who pretends to have intelligence should have the common sense not to dish out dogmas in such doses so people won't bloat or choke. But you so-called educated women either mistake book sense for wisdom or dismiss the common for the ordinary and inferior (85).

Okei's critique of the feminist propaganda uttered by Ruth and Daisy does not negate that it has something important to offer to African women. What he is opposed to is the indiscriminate imposition of any foreign "dogma". As spectators we feel compelled to ask why he occupies such a central role in a drama whose basic issues concern women. Given that he belongs to the middle- class, would his aversion to feminism be construed as his reluctance to give the middle-class women credit for their project? Onwueme does not represent him as a male who opposes women's efforts for the sake of it, unlike such men as Koko and Okeke; rather his concern lies with those who carry the mantle to this crusade. We witness his efforts to harmonise his family when Daisy deliberately tries to disintegrate it in the pursuit of what she terms "business engagement" (91). His dramatic function is to question the sincerity of the middle-class, when it comes to helping those of a lower social status. Okei's lack of faith in the middle-class women is confirmed by the behavior of his wife, who, upon been told that the rural women have already arrived in the city, immediately starts showing positive attention to both Yemoja and Sherifat. Emerging as another voice of reason in this drama, Okei points out the criminality of misusing, exploiting, and undermining the rural women just because they belong to a supposedly inferior class:

> OKEI: You see? Note your own words. For you the whole mission is a game...of power. For them it is life. It is a matter of their own survival in a world that is disappearing . . . Are you telling me that you are playing a game with people's lives? *(Pause)* That is criminal. (90)

Paying little attention to Okei's criticisms of her attitude towards the rural women, Daisy argues that it would be better if the program was changed from "Better Life for

Rural Women" to "Better Life for Better Women" (117). In this statement, Okei's fear of the opportunism that the middle-class women have adopted towards the new project is confirmed. One is left wondering whether it is possible for women to find common ground in a social system that emphasizes the pursuit of power and social status.

bell hooks' perspective on solidarity can help the spectators appreciate the potential that bonding between the rural and middle-class women can achieve. According to her, "Sisterhood solidarity" can strengthen the struggle against marginalization and "show that barriers separating women can be eliminated, that solidarity can exist" (44). If solidarity anticipates the possibilities of erasing class boundaries between women, it is the rural women who live its true meaning, especially when they come to the city. Unlike Ruth and Daisy, who use their social status to manipulate women, Sherifat and Adaku use their age, status, and experience to inspire the younger women such as Yemoja and the ten-year-old girl, Bose. Through these rural women, Onwueme shows their capacity to live in a supportive society.

The failure to live as a supportive community is what is attacked in *Tell it to Women*. Sherifat's attacks against the government should be seen in this context, where insincerity and opportunism abound. In her attack, she points out at the government's unreliability and inconsistency when dealing with rural women. Most of her criticisms against the government also apply to Ruth and Daisy, whose vested interests in the rural program are self-centred. While Ruth thinks of the rural project as a stepping-stone towards gaining a doctorate degree, Daisy's specific interest lies in the funds that will be allocated to the project (116). Amid such a background, Sherifat's

counter-discourse, which takes the form of an indictment of the government, is worth looking at:

> SHERIFAT: When "Gomenti" [government] is not a chameleon, changing colors to suit its purpose, it is a rat biting you and blowing air into the sores to soothe the pain. We have not forgotten all they did to us in the last election. They made so many promises . . . That same "Gomenti" came to remove the water pipes and poles after we voted, because they lost the elections. Idu remembers this . . . And I tell you, every daughter of Idu knows that people in "Gomenti" never give a present without wanting something in return. We are aware of that. That is why they sent me here, because Yemoja is just one woman and she is still young. (122)

Realising that their rural counterparts are not as naive as they thought, Ruth and Daisy shrewdly decide to surrender their control over the rural project. However, the surrender is opportunistic, since it occurs when they are caught unaware by the arrival of the rural women in the city. Their surrender is intended to serve as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it aims at making the rural women feel empowered and in control of *their* project, while on the other, it gives Ruth and Daisy the opportunity to cover up their failure to organize the ceremony. In surrendering their "power", Ruth and Daisy are convinced that after the launching ceremony is over, all the credit for the handling of the project will go to them. Onwueme uses this occasion to show the bankruptcy of their leadership qualities. When Ruth and Daisy instruct Sherifat and Yemoja to teach the other women "a Western military marching song" (143), we see them as agents collaborating with the forces of cultural imperialism. Since they have been identified

with everything that is Western from the outset, I suggest that the audience would not be surprised by their "odd choice." Bearing in mind that their own personal names too have no African cultural relevance, it appears that as spectators we would be expecting too much if we were to count on their preference for non-Western music.

When she wants to represent middle-class women as having lost touch with the daily realities of rural women's lives, Onwueme resorts to satire. Daisy's attempt to teach a Western military tune, for instance, becomes a ridiculous depiction of the foreign paradigms that she believes are better than the indigenous ones. Her appropriation of Western values and doctrines is exposed in her passionate attempt to show Sherifat and Yemoja how to march to the new music. Given that Ruth's treatment of the two in the city has been far from being hospitable, one would expect her to read the profound irony behind Sherifat's sudden acquiescence:

> DAISY: *(Still marching)* Oh sure! Sure! Everything's okay, . . . (*She notices that SHERIFAT too is marching and is greatly amused by this)*
>
> YEMOJA: Ehn, our mother! You too?
>
> SHERIFAT: Well, my child. What else do you expect me to do while I'm still here? The world is like a masquerade, changing, dancing, dancing, changing steps every time. If you want to see the dance fully, if you want to be an accountable witness, you must change your step too. Isn't that what your new world calls for? I'm doing it! We're doing it Yemoja, it's your turn. Join the dance. (144)

Since I have never seen this play produced anywhere, I would imagine that an actor would play Daisy here as an over-enthusiastic marcher. Thus the *mise en scene* would

reveal a group of women initiating Western customs, revealing, as Fanon argues, their lack of cultural identity. Such a class aspires to be like its colonial masters, hence its penchant for slavish imitation (Fanon, 153).

When Yemoja and Sherifat find Daisy's foreign model too difficult to understand, they collectively decide to substitute the foreign marching steps with familiar ones performed in the New Yam Festival's ritual dance. In this familiar dance/festival, two masquerades are normally used. One masquerade for the ritual dance is used to mark the new season, while the other marks the end of the old season (150). Sherifat suggests that Yemoja and Bose would be best suited for the roles. According to her, the ten-year-old Bose would make a new season masquerade, while Yemoja would represent the old season. In this way, Sherifat is able to frustrate Daisy's efforts to exclude her daughter from participating in the ceremony. Excited that she will be a participant in the women's cause, the precocious ten-year-old Bose, who hardly knows what a masquerade is, seeks the answer from her grandmother:

> BOSE: What's a masquerade, Grandma?
>
> SHERIFAT: Hmm . . . a masquerade . . . masquerades. Now, how do I explain it? You are still very young. But . . . ehh . . . hmmm . . . let's put it this way. A masquerade is the symbol of the ancestors . . . You know, the ancient ones: our great mother on earth . . . lying in earth? You remember what I told you before? (152)

Bose may not understand the metaphysical value of her culture, but on the eve of the launching of the women's program, another "young woman" is literally recruited to a noble cause. Onwueme's use of Bose is deliberate. Unlike her Westernized mother,

Bose becomes a symbol of hope for rural women. In her, they see a future generation eager to stand for progressive African cultural values, while at the same time aspiring to the positive changes that modernization can offer.

In the final Movement of the play, entitled "Drums for Women", Onwueme presents the climatic action where the counter-discourse of the rural women is shown in their ability to organize themselves, reject a foreign dance, and come up with their own local dance. When the rest of the rural women come to the city, the spectator is able to sense their feeling of misplacement and alienation, judging from the insensitive way in which their hosts handle them. While their hosts believe that booking them into a first-class hotel is the best thing they have done for the women, the rural women feel otherwise. Gloomily, Adaku expresses the fear of entrapment being experienced by the others. She is convinced that by coming to the hostile city, the rural women are making a fool of themselves. For instance, the failure of Sherifat and Yemoja to welcome them into the city is interpreted as a further sign of their willful foolishness. It points out that even those who ought to know the cultural patterns of Idu metaphorically "lose their minds" once they reach the city.

Does this therefore mean that to embrace certain Western values or changes brought by Western knowledge necessarily leads to cultural dislocation? Onwueme's response here is a firm negative -- a response with which I agree. Western education, theory, and technology are not necessarily negative. They only become negative; once they are introduced into local contexts as a master narrative. In such a case, there is an inevitable need to stand back and critically re-examine their use-value. The notion of the West's use-value in the play is not lost to the rural women, which is why they do

not condemn everything about and from the West *in toto*. In this respect, I also reiterate that Ruth and Daisy's embracing of Western feminist theory is not essentially out of place, for the theory has been instrumental in bringing women out of the margins. What is questionable about Ruth and Daisy is their preference for everything that is Western and above all their attempt to impose their preference on the rural women.

In order to highlight the exotic preferences portrayed by Ruth and Daisy, Onwueme employs irony to deflate their complacency on having entered a different worldview from the rest of the rural women. By having Ruth excitedly sing Jimmy Cliff's song entitled "Use what you have to get what you want" (183), Onwueme is able to underscore two points. First, she is able to reinforce the two women's attachment to any product offered by the capitalist West, and second, she succeeds in representing the glorification of opportunism practiced by the middle-class characters. The words in Cliff's song ironically acquire a larger significance than Ruth thinks about. For Ruth, they mean taking advantage of the rural women's project and earning academic degrees or even dipping their hands into the funds allocated. Ironically - and this is where Onwueme's mastery of her genre emerges - the very words, or rather the spirit behind them, become the rallying cry that to which rural women resort to during the launching ceremony of the rural project.

Having learned that their own counterparts Yemoja and Sherifat have been subjected to humiliation, the rural women decide to "use what they have to get what they want". It is Sherifat who moves the rural women when she explains her failure to welcome them upon arriving in the city. Using proverbs to capture her experience in

the city, Sherifat explains that it "is not everything that a palm-wine tapper sees from the treetop that he tells" (185), while Adaku responds by saying that "the sickness which prevents the rooster from crowing at night must not be taken lightly" (185). Having been humiliated in the city, the rural women do not find it difficult to understand the import of Sherifat's message. In their response, they vow to bond together by challenging any foreign models and doctrines that are shoved down their throats in the name of "Better Life for Rural Women." Interestingly, their resolution is marked by the same forcefulness that is inherent in Jimmy Cliff's song:

> YEMOJA: We have the drum. We have our path . . . We know our path. They have all else but not our drums.
>
> CHORUS: And our feet to follow the road.
>
> YEMOJA: We have our paths. Our feet are grounded in earth and sea
>
> CHORUS: We drum! We dance! We drum and dance.
>
> YEMOJA: They cannot drown our steps with a marching song. Why must we abandon our own dance to match another's steps? (188)

Yemoja's question becomes the drama that is enacted before the assembled guests led by Her Excellency, the illiterate wife of the president, cabinet ministers, and the men of Idu who also come to the city for the ceremony. Hoping to impress everybody present, especially Her Excellency, Daisy gives an opening speech that is full of double-edged statements. According to her, the presence of Her Excellency symbolizes the good intentions of the government to assist the rural women. It is ironic too, that Daisy should also claim that Her Excellency represents "the voice of us whose knowledge, whose vision, has expanded tremendously with education from other lands" (199),

given that she was the subject of their scorn earlier due to her illiteracy (116). From Daisy's perspective, it is the mission of the educated women to open the eyes of the ignorant rural women to the new ways: "We have come to open their eyes to the new ways. We are the voices of our mothers" (199).

Daisy's speech as presented is characterized by dishonesty. Most of her statements take on an ironic dimension, such as her reference to the blindness of the rural women. We have already seen Sherifat and Yemoja reluctantly acquiesce to her suggestions of a foreign dance, yet she does not think critically about their rationale. By making her blind to the poignancy of such a moment, Onwueme ridicules the middle-class belief that the rural women are spineless and can be manipulated at will. The ironical representation of the middle-class does not stop with Ruth and Daisy, but also extends to Her Excellency. Onwueme shows her parroting a speech that is obviously not original. If we believe Ruth and Daisy's reference to the illiteracy of Her Excellency then it becomes almost hilarious that an illiterate woman should be paraded as an embodiment of the "voice of us [that] knowledge has expanded tremendously" (199).

A critical analysis of Her Excellency's speech makes the audiences wonder whether she understands half of the things she talks about: "It is our time to be heard. For years, women's voices have been oppressed and marginalized, exploited and burdened in the patriarchal hierarchy of the feudalistic hegemony" (199). What comes across from Daisy and Her Excellency's speeches is an attempt by middle-class women to display a know-it-all-attitude before their supposedly inferior others. Onwueme suggests that it is unfortunate that women who seem to have made it in the hierarchy

do not have real commitment to the cause of those who are below them. Thus, Ruth, Daisy, and Her Excellency pretend to support a grandiose campaign when they really know that the plight of the rural women is extraneous to their ambitions.

Onwueme does not let the middle-class women get away with their ostentatious behavior. Instead, having represented their inflated egos, she lets the rural women speak out finally for themselves. Their entrance on the stage marks the climatic moment in *Tell it to Women* for it marks the final un-masking of the middle-class women. Yemoja, who has been chosen as the women's voice, leads them in an open denunciation of the self-appointed spokeswomen. This denunciation embarrasses the convenors of the ceremony and becomes the first pointer that the rural women are neither blind nor ignorant as it has been assumed. Through numerous questions posed before the gathered assembly, Onwueme is able to portray their ability to see through the hypocrisy of the middle-class women:

> YEMOJA: *(Pause) Today* is the day long awaited. The women are here! The mothers are here! The drums are here! WHO CAN TAKE THE VOICE OF THE DRUM? *(This is followed by thunderous drumming from the women).* The drums know what animal skin they come from . . . Who can silence the drums? Who says the drums are silent . . . The mothers are here! They have the drums! They own the drums! Who else can speak for the drums?
>
> CHORUS OF WOMEN: None that is born of woman! (*HER EXCELLENCY, DAISY and RUTH are becoming fidgety now*).

YEMOJA: Who has the power to slash the power of the drum and then talk in the place?

CHORUS OF WOMEN: None that is born of woman! *(Growing uneasiness among the elite women. DAISY and RUTH can be seen huddling together and conferring. YEMOJA continues her speech*).

YEMOJA: Our drum is woman! Our drum is mother! Who says the drums are silent?

CHORUS OF WOMEN: The drums are here! (200)

In this denunciation, the "drums" symbolize the rural women who have been dismissed all along. By leading the denunciation, Yemoja gets the opportunity to unmask the very people who have humiliated her in the city. Such an occasion shows the world that rural women have minds of their own and should not be objectified as passive, victimized and voiceless. As a young rural woman, Yemoja stands for the new generation that is ready to take over from the elderly women like Adaku and Sherifat. At the same time, she is strategically situated, in that she can comprehend the new world of "white man's education" as well as that of the drums of Idu. Having seen her qualities, it is not lost amongst the women that Yemoja should have the torch of leadership passed to her. Metaphorically, it is Adaku who symbolizes this torch. When she speaks some of her last words in the play, her proverbial advice is full of wisdom and experience; "All fowls may look alike. But the home-grown hen is never mistaken for the guinea fowl that roams the forest, jumping from one end of it to the other and never owning any place or space of her own . . . How can a guinea fowl take the place of the hen?" (207). Having come the full journey despite her old age and

having experienced humiliation at the hands of the city women, she is able to confirm the hypocrisy of the Western-educated middle-class women.

Through the two, Yemoja and Adaku, Onwueme gives the rural women a powerful voice that is not afraid to expose their oppressors. Due to their frankness, especially their assertion that nobody should claim to speak *for* Idu women, Yemoja enrages both Ruth and Daisy, who are described as "fuming and burning silently" (210). To be unmasked in front of everybody is humiliating but like the rest of the assembled guests, both have to witness the women's new dance where the ritual of the carrying of the effigies of the new and old yams' spirits is involved. When the women are called into the arena to march to the expected Western military music, drums instead rapidly rise to ecstatic pitches and the yam festival ritual starts to take place amidst well coordinated rhythms. During the most dramatic moment of the ritual, Bose enters the arena's centre stage dressed as a masquerade.

Bose's role in the women's affairs fulfills an ambition that Daisy has suppressed, despite her daughter's plea. Her shock is therefore unimaginable when she realises that it is her daughter who is disguised as a masquerade. Daisy must be overwhelmed by the implication of Bose's symbolic function in the ritual, for it means that her ten-year-old daughter now represents a new spirit of women familiar with their own cultural identities. Unable to bear this new development, Daisy's frenetic screams of "Noooooooo! NOT MY DAUGHTER" (210) competes with the vibrancy of the drums. In an attempt to rescue her daughter, she dashes from her seat to centre stage, but is trapped and encircled by the women. Ruth too attempts to flee from this embarrassment but the rural women get hold of her in time. Meanwhile, as the new

yam spirit, Bose dances towards her father and other elders in the arena as a mark of traditional respect. Proud of his daughter's new role, Okei joins Bose and both go to meet Daisy, who has been forced to carry the effigy that was on Bose's head. The implication of this symbolic gesture is that she is being urged to identify with the rural women rather than manipulating them and alienating herself in the process. If Daisy has temporarily been made aware of where her loyalty should lie, Ruth remains unconvinced, and in her attempt to escape, ends up falling on Adaku, "crushing the old woman to death" (210).

By ending with the killing of Adaku, Onwueme seems to be closing her drama with an unconvincing contrived death. Adaku's death is melodramatic, but is counterbalanced by the initiation of Bose into the politics of Idu women and the recognizable efforts of Yemoja, which means Adaku's spirit lives in the two. As Omu of Idu, she has played a pivotal role in preventing the daughters of Umuada from being manipulated by their middle-class sisters. As *Tell it to Women* comes to an end, Onwueme's drama becomes a clear illustration of how women's oppression is explained by a complex intersection of class, sex, gender, and regional differences.

What will happen now that the middle-class women have been forced into recognizing the greater goal of empowering all the rural women? In *Tell it to Women*, Onwueme provides some of the answer by pointing out the possibility of the dawn of a new era. She has exposed the hypocrisy and opportunism of the middle-class women. Despite the death of Adaku, Onwueme ensures that the Daughters of Umuada are left with the two competent female successors, namely Yemoja and Bose. Thus, the continuity of the women's awareness and consciousness that Adaku has tried to

reinforce is bound to continue. The fact that Ruth and Daisy eventually surrender is an optimistic statement from Onwueme. Their defeat is an inspiration to all underprivileged women in Africa to tell the world of their dissatisfaction with the status that the society has prescribed for them. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the theatrical action of substituting the traditional dance for the foreign one.

In *Tell it to Women*, part of my argument has been that not everything from the West needs to be rejected, but that slavish imitation is not acceptable either. My position has been that through Ruth and Daisy, Onwueme has provided the spectator with ideological beliefs of radical and liberal feminist theories. Similarly, Yemoja, Adaku, Sherifat, and rural women in general, are represented as mouthpieces whose function generally becomes to learn to espouse the gender politics of materialist feminist theory, as they understand them. The failure of Ruth's and Daisy's rhetoric of radical feminism to address fully the women's problems reflects the logical sequence in which feminist theory addresses women's oppression. First, liberal feminist theory starts by advocating for equal chances for men and women in positions of power. Second, radical feminist theory follows with its preference for absolute separation of the sexes. Finally, materialist feminist theory sees material and social conditions, rather than men, as specifically responsible for women's oppression.

In my analysis of *Tell it to Women*, I have tried to avoid valorizing all the indigenous African institutions and structures on the one hand, and condemning all the West's on the other. Instead, my task had been to show how Onwueme uses female characters as mouthpieces of gender politics in Africa. Through the female characters, we see an attempt by an African female playwright to grapple with the issues of

women's empowerment amidst rapidly growing competitive capitalist societies in Africa. Towards this end, I have been searching for an answer to the question: can *Tell it to Women* be considered a feminist play? My opinion is that *Tell it to Women* is a materialist feminist play, as it speaks to all men who care to listen to its politics, and includes all women regardless of their social statuses, in the various discourses that emerge.

CONCLUSION

> We cannot go forward without culture, without saying what we believe, without communicating with others, without making people think about things. (Mariama Ba, - interview with Harell-Bond, 214)

Exploring Tess Onwueme's three plays has been an enriching but arduous experience. One of the greatest challenges that I faced was confronting the wisdom encapsulated in the African proverb, "Beware of the mourner whose crying is louder than that of the bereaved family." A lot of my justified hesitancy in the study has been my fear of falling into the temptation to speak for and on behalf of African women. Being aware that my African masculine voice could interfere with an objective examination of African gender politics, I have had to remind myself not to be the proverbial mourner. Unfortunately, there were a number of times that I unwittingly fell into the temptation. My purpose in *Tell it to Women* has been to try to highlight emerging discourses and counter-discourses on gender politics, as represented by African female playwrights. Towards this end, I have tried to locate Onwueme's plays in the complicated maze of African gender politics.

In the process, I have discovered various mini-paths, but upon following them, found myself lost in the midst of what Foucault calls an aporia, or the "difficulty that stops us in our tracks" (xxiii). As discussed in the introduction, many feminist criticisms have given the permanent status of "victim" to the African female character. Onwueme's route occasionally portrays females who have been "victimized" by tyrannical patriarchy, such as Ona's mother. Nevertheless, there have been numerous "victim-agents" in her

works such as Ona, Wazobia, Omu, Adaku, Yemoja, Sherifat, and Bose, who show how the entrenched victimhood can be successfully resisted. Towards this end, Onwueme's drama challenges representation of females as victims, a position that contrasts with how African mainstream writers have portrayed female characters in the past.

The motif of empowered representation clearly emerged in the three plays under analysis. In *The Broken Calabash*, it is the youthful Ona who moves beyond the realm of naïve obedience to stultifying cultural practices, to a personal space where she is bold enough to make life-altering personal decisions. The denial of the right to make personal choices has been one way in which African female characters have been denied agency by their creators, male. By extension, the same rights have been denied to African women in general, as men cling onto their oppressive patriarchal powers. By representing Ona as a young woman who questions, and eventually manages to emerge victorious from the tyranny of specific cultural practices, Onwueme is able to inform her audience about a feminist aesthetic that portrays African women overcoming their subjugation. Ona ends up upsetting the male social structure that has tried to subdue her. As spectators, we may want to question how her father's death can be interpreted as a successful disruption of the hierarchical system that he symbolizes. We may argue that by taking the bold action of "eliminating" the obstruction, Ona becomes a different woman who will not succumb to any person willing to deny her power. In this respect, *The Broken Calabash* is a dramatic representation of a female character who refuses to be broken in spirit, despite a number of frustrations from her male-centred society.

If Ona refuses to be broken in *The Broken Calabash*, it is King Wazobia in *The Reign of Wazobia*, who resists any illegitimate takeover of her throne by greedy and

over-ambitious males. Moving beyond the domestic space in *The Broken Calabash*, *The Reign of Wazobia* takes the audience to a political space and confronts hegemonic patriarchal practices that again exclude women from the larger society. Here Wazobia continues in the same defiant spirit that Ona first portrays. Her refusal to give up the throne after having been chosen legally is another attempt to disrupt female subjugation. Most important is the collective profile that her battle of resistance takes. Unlike, Ona, who having been betrayed even by her friend Ugo, has nobody supporting her, Wazobia can count on the devotion of her female "wives" and a few levelheaded males like Chief Zo. It is through their support that she is able to protect her just reign from malicious and power-hungry male and female characters.

In *The Reign of Wazobia,* Onwueme cautions African women about the difficulties that are likely to be met in their paths to self-empowerment. She implies that such obstacles are bound to come from both conservative men and women who are self-interested. Thus ambition for power and greed becomes both a male and female desire in *The Reign of Wazobia*. Even though all these desires can only be contained by an egalitarian society, a society that to me seems utopian, Onwueme suggests at the least that the bonding of women is a positive step towards realizing that it is not hard to lengthen the reigns of potential Wazobias.

The theme of bonding permeates the last play, *Tell it to Women.* Structured as a conflict between rural and middle-class women, *Tell it to Women* takes us to a public realm larger than that in *The Broken Calabash,* because it also involves the city. The rural women's demand for fair play from Ruth and Daisy is marked by an insistent and urgent request to "tell it to women" (61,66, 207). The phrase "tell it to women"

becomes a spirited phrase, a counter-discourse that challenges the middle-class women's presentation of themselves as the legitimate voices of all the women. It also becomes a powerful tool for exposing the hypocrisy of the middle-class women who speak deceptively in "feminine voices, and all in the name of liberation?/Who now abuse us/and who push us down and drown out our voices with the flow of their ink" (207).

Like the solidarity between King Wazobia and her faithful female servants, the rural women's solidarity enables them to sabotage Ruth's and Daisy's pretense of helping them improve their lives. In their desire to make it to the top, like the men with whom they compete, Ruth and Daisy overstep the mark and forget that riding on the backs of the less educated rural women will not guarantee them success. Thus, in *Tell it to Women,* Onwueme warns against taking a condescending attitude towards women of lower status, the very attitude that goes on to construct them as permanent victims.

In this play, the rural women live true to the Ibo's proverb about the handshake: "When the handshake extends beyond the elbow it ceases to be handshake." Ruth and Daisy's handshake, represented symbolically in the form of their campaign for better life for rural women, extends beyond the elbow and soon invites resentment, and is eventually rejected. Like Ona's humiliating scandalous exposure of her father, similar to Wazobia's defeat of the insurrectionists in her kingdom, the rural women's unmasking of the hypocrisy and ruthlessness of the ultra-modern Western educated Ruth and Daisy takes place in public. This invasion of public space becomes symbolic and connects all the three plays. In it, Onwueme enacts the struggle against female marginalization. Through it, she points out that there is hope for the women as they struggle to get better treatment in the society. It is important to remember that in dismissing Ruth and Daisy's

"handshake," Onwueme is not saying that they are beyond redemption, but she is hinting that it is the competitive nature of the society that has made them so predatory.

Through the encounter of various discourse and counter-discourses, Onwueme's rural female characters emerge as speaking subjects and agents for change. Their ability to reclaim the power of speech, sometimes silencing and un-silencing themselves, makes it possible to read her plays as dramatic texts with theoretical overtones. Characters like Adaku, who seem to be speaking back to Western feminist theories, are informed by their ability to combine African wisdom with Western knowledge.

What I have tried to do in this study is to show how African writers like Onwueme need to be incorporated into the African dramatic canon. In her three plays, *The Broken Calabash*, *The Reign of Wazobia* and *Tell it to Women*, Onwueme comes out as a female writer who redefines the male-dominated African literary tradition by uncovering its gaps and silences. By initiating a dialogue on gender, Onwueme has occasioned a change in the orientation of African drama. It is a change which not only defines her works as feminist, but one which even transcends the manichean allegory of gender binaries as "either / or". Eventually, as we read these plays, we realize a new awareness in African literature, one that looks forward to the (re) emergence of more just societies.

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